

ATTRITION

Gregory O. Scott

For Jason Fry, Dan Wallace, Paul
Urquhart, and all the other historians.

PART I: GUARDIAN
37 YEARS ABY

The narrow prow of the super star destroyer *Guardian* slipped through space. Its grey-and-black dagger, nineteen kilometers long, passed in front of Corellia's primary sun and draped a blurred narrow shadow across the cloudy face of the world's northern hemisphere.

A squadron of starfighters from Corellia's local defense force broke free of the planet's orbit and vectored directly toward the massive warship. They remained on an intercept course until the very last minute, when they swung their noses ninety degrees, kicked their afterburners to full, and lanced forward. They trailed ribbons of vapors that ignited under engine-flares and glowed brilliant, twisting streaks of red and white as they raced past the ship's mid-section observation deck. The starfighters finally slowed to settle in two graceful columns just beyond *Guardian*'s bow, dangling flashing light-streams behind them.

It was an understated but graceful honor guard, Corellia's contribution to the funeral procession that would lead its most honored son home.

As he stood on the transparisteel-domed observation deck built into *Guardian*'s forward superstructure, Grand Admiral Gilad Pellaeon watched those twirling lights and allowed himself the grim indulgence of wondering what kind of funeral he would get when his time came.

Like the man they laid to rest today, Pellaeon had been born on Corellia, but unlike him, he'd spent most of his life

disconnected from the planet. He'd lived on other worlds-Coruscant, Anaxes, Carida, Bastion- but his real home was always the ships he'd commanded over a career spanning almost sixty years.

Not *Guardian*, though. The beautiful giant was, best anyone knew, the last surviving vessel of the *Executor*-class to roll off the Empire's shipyards, but she had been abandoned by her owners, later captured and slowly refitted by the New Republic. Now she was the largest ship in the Galactic Alliance navy, though her armor and armaments were nothing like what they'd been when she was first built. There was no need for them. She guarded a galaxy at peace.

Gilad Pellaeon stood at the head of an assembly that gathered too many legends and luminaries to count. It seemed like they had converged on Corellia from all corners and governments across the galaxy. It was historic, just having them all here.

Down at the end of the line there was Wedge Antilles in the red-sashed Alliance dress uniform he must have pulled out of the closet of whatever home he'd been enjoying retirement in down on Corellia. Next to him was his inseparable partner Tycho Celchu, still acting as a senior advisor in the Alliance navy.

Beside those old men were the newer breed: Cha Niathal and Nek Bwa'tu, Mon Calamari and Bothan, symbols of the influence of their two races but also highly talented admirals in their own right and the best to come up through the Alliance ranks since the end of the Yuuzhan Vong War seven years ago.

And there were others in the line, all members of the Galactic Alliance but wearing the uniforms of their constituent navies. There was Admiral Lenola Baas, tall and stately in the blue uniform of the Hapan Royal Navy. Further back, the thick-bodied, violet-skinned Dornean General Etahn A'baht. Part of a long-lived race, A'baht probably represented more years of combat experience than anyone assembled today, even Pellaeon himself. Beside him

was another Bothan, the white-furred Traest Kre'fey, who had been caught between political pressures after the end of the Yuuzhan Vong War and resigned his Alliance commission. He wore a trim black civilian suit that contrasted greatly with his snowy fur.

Pellaeon wore his white Grand Admiral's uniform, complete with gold epaulets. The cut of the uniform was standard Imperial design but the rank badge on his chest bore the marks of the Supreme Commander of the Galactic Alliance Armed Forces. Standing beside him was Turr Phennir. Like Antilles, the retired fighter ace must have dug his uniform out of a closet. Imperial in design, it was colored deep black save for the red bloodstripes running down either side, marking the owner as part of the elite 181st Fighter Wing.

Pellaeon and Phennir were the only two representatives wearing the uniforms of the Galactic Empire today, or as the other beings here usually called it (though rarely to his face) the Imperial Remnant. The vast union that had once encompassed most of the known galaxy had been reduced to two drops in an ocean, and Pellaeon was no longer sure he regretted it.

He didn't speak his thoughts to Phennir. He didn't speak to the man at all as they waited for the funeral ceremony to begin. Even when they'd fought on the same campaigns, there's been little for them to speak about. They had always been two different kinds of Imperial.

Thankfully, Pellaeon didn't have to stand awkwardly beside Phennir for long. The murmured conversations in the assembled crowd hushed to nothing as three humans walked onto the stage at the front of the observation deck.

Against a wonderful backdrop of stars, gleaming exhaust-trails, and Corellia's soft glow, they took their places at the podium. On one side, Cal Omas, Chief of State of the Galactic Alliance. On the other, Aidel Saxan, Prime Minister of the Five Worlds of the Corellian System. And finally, in the center stood Leia Organa Solo.

It had been forty years since Pellaeon had watched holo-broadcasts of the willful young woman giving speeches before the Imperial Senate. Decades had turned her hair gray and wrote wrinkles on her face, but she still possessed the poise and confidence she had as a precocious teenager.

"We are gathered here today," she said, "To commemorate the life of the last great leader of the Rebel Alliance."

Phennir made an unhappy sound deep in his throat. Pellaeon understood the feeling but said nothing.

Behind the podium, a holo-image blazed to life and loomed over the crowd. It was a head-and-shoulders view of a man none of them would ever forget. The holo, taken somewhere in the waning of the man's middle age, showed a wide mouth beneath a gray mustache, a forehead creased in concentration, and thick eyebrows drawn together over a pair of intent, probing eyes.

"In losing Garm Bel Iblis," Leia said, "The galaxy loses its last living reminder of the great bravery it took to stand against the oppression of Emperor Palpatine. Bel Iblis was a senator famed and respected across the galaxy before I was even born. He was a close ally to my father, and a constant inspiration to me since childhood. He inspires me still the same way he did fifty years ago, through his principled stands, his brave actions, his sharp intelligence and deep wisdom.

"In losing Garm Bel Iblis we've lost an essential piece of history, but the galaxy we live in today is one he created, along with my father and Mon Mothma, when they signed the Corellian Treaty and formally created the Alliance to Restore the Republic.

"We are not here today to grieve. Garm Bel Iblis lived a long life and died peacefully in a galaxy that was peaceful and free. We are here to commemorate this great man, and celebrate that we now live his dream."

As Leia stepped back from the podium, the crowd began to applaud. The old rebels like Antilles and Celchu clapped

the loudest; the young ones like Bwa'tu and Niathal were only slightly less enthusiastic. Ones without direct experience in the Imperial-Alliance war, like Admiral Baas, applauded more dutifully. Pellaeon glanced askance and saw Phennir with his hands at his side, back stiff, watching the podium with an unreadable expression.

A part of Pellaeon wanted to join the applause. It was an overwhelming rush that threatened to sweep him along, but he held himself. On one level, it felt like a mockery that he was here at all, celebrating the life of a man who'd brought down the government he'd served for over fifty years. On another level, it felt right to pay respect. Bel Iblis had been an honorable man and a capable adversary. If an enemy was ever deserving of respect, it was Bel Iblis.

But because Phennir did not applaud, he didn't either. If nothing else, it would save him embarrassment back on Bastion, where the moffs were surely watching the broadcast of this event with gnashing teeth and seething anger at yet another reminder of how far the Empire had fallen.

Leia was replaced at the podium by Prime Minister Saxan. She gave a very fine speech of her own, extolling Garm Bel Iblis from a specifically Corellian point of view. She spoke of how he embodied the bold spirit of his homeworld and the willingness to cooperate, negotiate, and promote ideas of unity that kept both the Five Worlds and the Galactic Alliance together.

It was all true enough, but Pellaeon felt she went on a bit longer than necessary. After all, Bel Iblis hadn't always been a unifier. After a split with Mon Mothma, he'd fought a separate, private war against the Empire for over ten years, and had only relinquished his grudge when Coruscant itself was under siege by Grand Admiral Thrawn.

Stubbornness was, of course, another famed Corellian trait, but not one Saxan wished to emphasize right then. Suspecting he wasn't the target audience for this speech, Pellaeon subtly scanned the crowd of dignitaries for representatives of the Corellian government.

He quickly spotted Saxan's Minister of Defense, Thrackan Sal-Solo. Looking like an older, gray-bearded version of his mildly less roguish cousin, Sal-Solo listened with his arms crossed over his chest and an impatient look on his face. When Saxan finished her talk, everyone gave another big round of applause, even Phennir, since this speech didn't praise the Rebellion as much. Pellaeon joined in, but as he glimpsed Sal-Solo from the corner of his eye, he watched the man give a few very lazy claps before recrossing his arm, very stubbornly.

Finally, Cal Omas stepped up to give the final speech. His piece was thankfully short and direct.

"There's no way to put my admiration and respect for Garm Bel Iblis into words," Omas said, "So I won't even try. What I will do is give this great man something close to the send-off he richly deserves. As per his request, his body has been loaded into a capsule that will now be fired from *Guardian's* forward torpedo bay and shoot into the heart of Corellia's sun."

The holo-image of Bel Iblis winked out, making the star-sea behind Omas visible once more. Their speeches had apparently been better timed than Pellaeon expected; right above Omas, directly beyond *Guardian's* pointed stern, was the bright white glare of Corellia's primary.

"As Counselor Organa Solo so eloquently put it," said Omas, "We are now living Garm Bel Iblis' dream of freedom and peace. We honor that dream today, so we might continue to live it in the future."

Omas turned to face Corellia's sun and raised one hand. On that signal, a single projectile shot out from *Guardian's* most forward cannon. It had apparently been fitted with the same energy-streamers as the Correllian fighters still keeping honor guard, and its twirling red and white tails flailed behind it as it shot toward the sun.

As he watched that projectile dwindle into nothing, taking the body of the great man with it, Pellaeon wondered again what his funeral would be like.

He hoped it would be something like this. He hoped he left a galaxy that was peaceful and secure. He hoped he died like Bel Iblis, in his bed.

His mind rolled back through all the other legends and luminaries who had gone before. It seemed like the former rebels had gotten, as a whole, better deaths than their Imperial counterparts. There'd been some exceptions, of course: Pellaeon's predecessor as Supreme Commander of the combined Alliance fleets, Sien Sovv, had died in a spacecraft accident, and Bail Organa had perished with Alderaan, but so many others had passed away calmly like Bel Iblis. Mon Mothma had died before the Yuuzhan Vong War tore up much of what she'd spent her life trying to accomplish, as had old warhorses like Jan Dodonna, Adar Tallon, and Firmus Nantz. Ackbar had slipped away in his pool on Mon Calamari.

As for the Imperials, it seemed like they'd all ended badly. Palpatine and Vader and Tarkin, of course, but also Thrawn and the other grand admirals, thirteen in whole, had all died violently. Pestage had abdicated but been murdered anyway. Isard had been gunned down. Kaine's shuttle had been intercepted by rebel assassins. Krennel and Zsinj had been vaporized with their warships. All those old Deep Core warlords like Harrsk, Teradoc, and Delvardus had been poisoned while Pellaeon had been forced to watch.

Others, like that mysterious High Inquisitor Jerec, had gotten themselves killed trying to best the resurgent Jedi Order. Yes, he knew others who'd died in bed- Aren Dorja had kicked it just last year, and wily old Villim Disra had clung on even through the Vong invasion- but they often felt like the exception, not the rule, and the rule seemed to stretch from Palpatine himself all the way down to all the stormtroopers and pilots lost through the attrition of endless warfare.

Men like his son.

All in all, Pellaeon knew it didn't bode well for his own future, which was why he clung to Bel Iblis' dream as he

watched the man's coffin dwindle to nothing and be swallowed up by the light of Corellia's sun.

It had never been his dream, but it was all he had left.

After the ceremony came the socializing. The mood wasn't a sorrowful one; Garm Bel Iblis had lived long, died peacefully, and left behind a stable union. It was as happy an ending as any being could want, so the plates of food and glasses and wine didn't feel out-of-place. Even the holo-news crews, flitting around and asking for short words from the assembled luminaries, didn't seem crass.

Once the podium was cleared, the beings gathered in orderly rows on the deck of *Guardian's* observation dome fractured into disparate clusters. The speeches in honor of Bel Iblis had extolled the need for unity, and the fact that so many representatives from so many governments across the galaxy were here to respect him was a sign that his dream was, in fact, being pursued; however, beings fractured nonetheless, and for Tycho Celchu, it was interesting to see who fell in with whom, and which beings avoided each other.

Most of the representatives from Corellia's government, for example, fell into a tight circle and talked amongst themselves. Wedge Antilles, a little dutifully, grabbed some wine and food and went over to join them. Prime Minister Saxan, however, fell into talking with Cal Omas and after that moved around the deck, exchanging well-wishes with other beings but without dipping into the circle of her fellow Corellians.

Tycho wondered how much that had to do with her defense minister. It was well-known that Saxan and Sal-Solo didn't see eye-to-eye personally or politically, and that she'd only appointed him to her cabinet to appease his vocal minority of supporters. Sal-Solo had been a troublemaker for decades, usually at the head of some human-first and isolationist populist party, and Tycho was a little surprised to see him present at all. He supposed, even if the rest of the

galaxy saw Bel Iblis as an Alliance hero first and a Corellian one second, Corellians (or at least Sal-Solo's supporters) saw it the other way around.

Tycho noticed certain other systems forming their own little groups. The Hapans hadn't sent their queen, but their admiral, Lenola Baas, was surrounded by a cluster of similarly statuesque, aristocratic-looking women.

At the same time, there were odd pairings. Etahn A'baht and Traest Kre'fey talked together at the edge of the chamber; A'baht was the only Dornean present and Kre'fey seemed to be keeping his distance from the other Bothans in the room, probably because of the convoluted political differences Tycho had always had a hard time keeping track of. The two odd men out seemed to have fallen in together.

And then, of course, there were the Imperials. Grand Admiral Pellaeon, now Supreme Commander of the entire Alliance military, seemed to have fallen into easy conversation with Bwa'tu and Niathal. General Phennir stood at the edge of the conversation, saying nothing, a look of mild distaste on his scarred face. Tycho wondered if it was because he was in a conversation with so-called rebels, so-called subhumans, or both.

Whatever Phennir's issue. Pellaeon didn't seem to have it. Tycho was glad of that. It had been almost two years since Omas had asked Pellaeon to take command of the military after the untimely death of Admiral Sovv. Many beings, Tycho included, had felt alarm at his giving such a role to a former Imperial, even one as skilled, experienced, and generally friendly toward former rebels as Pellaeon. He'd even offered his hesitation in private conversation with Omas, to which the Chief of State had replied that if there was a more respected serving military officer in the galaxy, he hadn't heard of one.

Omas had been right. Pellaeon had been a capable administrator and confidence-inspiring leader, both during the Swarm War and in the peacetime afterward. The fact that he was talking with Bwa'tu and Niathal now, while

Phennir looked on sourly, was proof enough that Pellaeon was more than just an Imperial now.

"Are you all right, Tycho?" asked the woman beside him.

Jarred from his reverie, Tycho looked down and blinked. He was standing next to Leia Organa Solo, with Prime Minister Saxan herself in front of him, and he'd let his mind drift embarrassingly far from either

Tycho put on the polite smile he'd gradually honed as his rank improved, "I'm sorry, what was that?"

"I was just asking after Winter," Leia said. "I feel like it's been ages since we've talked."

"Winter's doing very well, thank you. Alliance Intel still keeps her in reserve, but she's mostly retired."

"Ah, retirement," Leia savored the word. "I'm surprised she hasn't dragged you down that path yourself. I know she's been trying."

"It was a personal request from Omas, believe it or not." Tycho tipped his wine-glass in the direction of the Chief of State, who was making conversation with the Hapans. "He promised me I'd just be overseeing and training new pilots. He said he wanted the best, and that it would be nonactive service only. So far, he's been true to his word."

Shifting her attention to Saxan, Leia explained, "General Celchu is married to a very good friend of mine. We've known each other since we were growing up on Alderaan and she helped raise my children."

"I can imagine you've had your hands full," Saxan nodded. She was taller than Leia but about the same age and possessed the same assured elegance. "Politics and family life tend to step on each other's toes, don't they?"

"Do you have children, Minister Saxan?" Tycho asked.

She shook her head. "No. In fact, I divorced five years ago."

"Oh." Tycho blinked. Leia said nothing, showed nothing; she'd probably already heard. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Don't be." Saxan turned and gestured to the circle of Corellians which, Tycho noted, was now bereft of a certain

Antilles. "Do you see the gentleman with dark hair, two to the left of Sal-Solo?"

Tycho nodded. He looked a good decade younger than Saxan herself. "I do."

"That is Denjax Teppler, now my Vice Minister."

"*And* your ex-husband?"

"We're much better political partners than we were any other kind."

Tycho didn't understand how that worked and he never would, so he didn't bother to try. Diplomatic skill deserted him; all he could say was, "Well, I'm glad it worked out."

"With a tight little smile, Saxan asked, "And what about *you*, General? Do you have children?"

"Oh, no," Tycho waved a hand. "Winter and I, well, we've had plenty of other things to keep us busy."

"Including *my* children," Leia added.

Tycho was about to ask where Leia's Corellian husband when Wedge Antilles, wine-glass refilled, slipped into the circle.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything serious," he said.

"We were just talking about children, actually," Tycho said with a little smile.

"Ah, well, I guess I know a few things about that."

"Are your two daughters well, General?" Saxan asked. As Prime Minister of the Five Worlds, it wasn't surprising that she knew more about the local hero, retired or not, than Tycho himself.

"They're doing well, thank you. So is my wife. I'm sorry she couldn't make it."

"It's all right," Tycho said, "Winter was busy too."

They both glanced at Leia, asking wordlessly where her husband (at this point, probably the most famous *living* Corellian) was instead of Bel Iblis' funeral.

Before she gave an answer, Saxan asked, "Your daughters are getting old enough to start choosing their own paths, aren't they? Do they plan on following your life path or your wife's?"

Wedge seemed to hesitate a bit before responding. He glanced sideways at Tycho, as if he already knew the answer, but Tycho didn't. They hadn't seen each other for almost six months before meeting on *Guardian* just before the funeral ceremony began, and Tycho had reserved a few days' leave to go down to Corellia and visit the Antilles home where his old friend was enjoying peaceful retirement.

Before Wedge could muster a response, the sound of localized applause reverberated from one corner of the deck.

All eyes, and all the holo-cameras, swiveled to watch as Thrackan Sal-Solo hopped on top of a chair and raised his glass for a toast. He was ringed by clapping supporters (Teppler, Tycho noted, not among them) and before he spoke he tugged at the rim of his collar and mussed his hair, giving a slightly roguish tint to his formal look that was as calculated as this seemingly-impromptu speech.

"I want to thank all you for coming here," Sal-Solo boomed, loud enough for the whole deck to hear him without a speaker-phone. "I also want to say how *proud* I am to be here and honor the greatest son Corellia's ever had!"

That got loud clapping from his supporters, and more polite applause from the large chunk of the audience that was too confused to do anything else.

"Garm Bel Iblis was a great man," Sal-Solo insisted, "The kind that embodied all the things that make Corellia great. When the Empire stepped in and wanted Corellia to play by its rules, he said *no*. When Mon Mothma wanted him to change the way he fought his war, he said *no*. When Borsk Fe'lya told him to stand back and let the Vong run amok over the whole fragging galaxy, he said *no* and fought 'em back on his own terms without any help from the rest of the Alliance."

Leia had dropped into a mask of practiced restraint; so had Saxan, but it looked like her mask was about to break in half and reveal an angry katarn beneath.

Still standing on his chair, glass raised high, Sal-Solo went on. "He was his own man through and through and he let no one, and I mean *no one*, tell him what to do. If that didn't make him the walking fragging embodiment of all that's good and bold in the Corellian spirit, well, I don't know what does!"

After another burst of applause, he raised his glass a little higher and said, "Here's one to you, General. We'll try not to let you down."

He toasted, he drank, he got his applause. Then he ruffled his gray hair again, making it even more messy and rakish, and hopped back down to the deck.

"Hmm," Tycho muttered, "That could have gone worse."

"You want to know why my husband isn't here?" Leia frowned as Sal-Solo descended back into a ring of admirers and grinned at the journalists scampering to interview him. "*That's* why."

"Well," Turr Phennir said as he watched the reporters flock to Sal-Solo, "That was suitably distasteful."

It was the first thing Phennir had said in fifteen minutes, but neither Niathal nor Bwa'tu seemed taken aback.

"That man does have a talent for grabbing attention," Cha Niathal said. The Mon Calamari's gravelly tones held as much contempt as Phennir's had.

"It was a well-played gambit." Bwa'tu observed. Always attuned to politics, even if he didn't like them, the Bothan continued, "Saxan refused him a speech, but he got his in with a way that's sure to grab more attention than anyone else's. And he didn't say anything actively treasonous."

"Or false," Niathal said. "It was true, every word. Bel Iblis could be... inconstant."

Pellaeon wasn't surprised to hear a little condemnation in the admiral's voice. Niathal had a sharper edge than rebel commanders of old. She expected beings to fall into line when ordered and hated when they didn't, even if the rogues were honorable heroes like Bel Iblis.

Bwa'tu, though, said, "Bel Iblis was a great man, and now that he's gone, everyone's going to be trying to claim a piece of his legacy. Sal-Solo is an ambitious one. It's no surprise he'd stake his claim fast."

"He's a dangerous man," Niathal said.

Bwa'tu nodded slightly. "We should be glad we have Saxan to keep him in check for now."

Niathal made a noise deep in her throat, like she didn't really believe that.

For the second time, Phennir spoke up. "If the Alliance lets men rise to positions of power while proclaiming themselves enemies of everything the Alliance stands for, it has only itself to blame when the trouble starts."

"Then we make sure that he stays *in check*," Niathal said.

Not for the first time, Pellaeon thought that Niathal would have made a decent Imperial admiral. A sideways glance at Phennir told him the old starfighter pilot had just had the same thought, and was surprised by it.

Pellaeon cleared his throat. "For the moment, at least, we have more immediate concerns than Thrackan Sal-Solo."

"I look forward to testing my mettle against yours next week, Grand Admiral." Bwa'tu flashed a very toothy, very Bothan smile.

"We'll be holding exercises next week," Pellaeon explained to Phennir.

"I've heard. You'll be using *Megador*," Phennir said, naming the largest vessel still in Imperial service. Phennir may have been retired, but clearly still had friends with ears in the military.

"It will be a joint operation," Pellaeon allowed. "The Hapans will be involved as well, along with as small samples from other local defense fleets. The Bothans, the Dorneans, even the Corellians."

"A team-building exercise," Phennir said evenly, though Pellaeon could hear the tired disdain in his voice.

"It's important that our units can work together cohesively," Niathal said. "During the Yuuzhan Vong

invasion, the New Republic's navy fractured. We can't make that mistake again."

"Well, then, I hope they have a firm hand to guide them." Phennir swallowed the last of his wine. "Grand Admiral, if you'll excuse me, I have appointments to keep back in Imperial space."

"So soon?" Pellaeon raise an eyebrow.

Phennir simply nodded and gave no explanation. "Good luck with your exercises, Grand Admiral."

He didn't salute but he did offer one hand for a shake. Pellaeon took it and squeezed it more firmly than Phennir squeezed back. He watched the man turn and go, watched red-banded shoulders and short-cropped hair, blond fading to white, disappear in the crowd.

When he turned back to the admirals he found another had joined them, the older Admiral Klauskin. They were already starting a new conversation and Pellaeon excused himself. He felt relieved that Phennir was gone, even if it left him the only Imperial in the room. Somehow, he'd come to feel more comfortable among aliens like Bwa'tu and Niathal than his own kind. That bothered him, but only when he stopped and dwelled on it.

Pellaeon went over to the refreshments table and refilled his wine glass. Back in the day he'd been able to put away whiskey like nobody else, but at his age he had to pace himself; it was already making him slightly weak in the legs.

As he turned away from the table he found himself facing two more alien faces: Traest Kre'fey and Etahn A'baht. Both were officers who had served in the New Republic Navy but were now retired. Pellaeon had forged a good working relationship with Kre'fey during the Yuuzhan Vong War, but A'baht was a more difficult case. Pellaeon had never served alongside him but at Celanon, almost twenty-five years ago now, the Dornean general had delivered him and the Empire a blow from which they'd never truly recovered.

A little awkwardly, Pellaeon extended his hand and shook. "I'm glad the two of you could make it. This funeral has become something of an old officer's reunion."

"Well, it was only appropriate to pay respects," Kre'fey said. "I don't mind seeing familiar faces either."

"And you, General," Pellaeon shifted to A'baht. "I understand you've come all the way from Dornea."

A'baht nodded. "That's right, but I was planning to come Coreward anyway. The timing was... a useful coincidence."

"What were you coming in for, General?" As far as Pellaeon knew, A'baht had settled into retirement in some very private estate on his homeworld and very rarely ventured into space anymore.

"The commander of the Dornean element to your war game exercises is an old friend of mine," A'baht explained. "He requested I come and observe."

"I see." Pellaeon stared into those small inscrutable eyes, deep-set on a wide alien face. "I look forward to your participation."

"It will be... interesting," A'baht said vaguely and gave nothing more.

Kre'fey was no fool; he surely knew about Celanon, so he interjected, "I've worked with the leader of the Bothan compliment. I assure you he's a fine officer. I look forward to seeing how he handles himself against Bwa'tu."

Kre'fey and Bwa'tu made another bit of awkwardness, one Pellaeon didn't understand as well; Bothan internal politics made the Empire's look positively straightforward.

He asked, "Will you be joining us, Admiral? Even as an observer?"

Kre'fey waved a white paw. "I'm not an admiral. I'm not anything anymore, just an old Bothan."

"Comfortably retired, it seems," A'baht said.

"Old soldiers deserve rest, even if I'm not on your level, or that of the, ah, honored dead." Kre'fey tilted his wine glass toward the transparisteel dome, through which the

glow of Corellia's primary was still visible. "The question is, Grand Admiral, when are *you* going to retire?"

"One day, perhaps," Pellaeon allowed, smiling a little beneath his white mustache. "But not quite yet."

"Well, whenever that day comes, you'll surely deserve it." He raised his glass and held it between the three of them. "To Bel Iblis' dream, gentlemen."

It was certainly worthy of a toast. Pellaeon gently tapped his glass against the good Bothan's. To the other side was A'baht's, and Pellaeon hesitated for a moment before the being who had fought him and cost him so much.

But he tapped A'baht's glass anyway, and they drank. Pellaeon was almost ninety years old and he'd learned how to put things behind him. With the life he'd lived, the strife he'd seen, the wars he'd fought, it was the only way for a man to stay sane.

PART II: CHIMAERA

4 YEARS ABY

The pale prow of the Imperial star destroyer *Chimaera* slid through high orbit over Endor's forest moon. Explosions burst on either side. Laserfire flashed out of its port and starboard batteries while its shields shuddered to absorb the impact of proton torpedoes and concussion missiles dropped by the rebel starfighters that swarmed like flit-gnats around its hull.

Captain Gilad Pellaeon, standing on the forward deck of his vessel's bridge, barely noticed the fight around him. Like the rest of his crew, his attention was drawn ahead toward the massive, sleek arrowhead of the super star destroyer *Executor*. Flame trailed from the wreckage of its bridge, its engines were dead, and it plunged like a dagger toward the half-completed sphere of the Second Death Star.

The entire battle over Endor had begun like a dream and steadily transformed into a nightmare. When *Chimaera* had arrived to join a force of over three dozen star destroyers, Pellaeon had been dazed by an armada bigger than any he'd seen in a career of almost thirty years. Then he'd seen the new Death Star hanging over the verdant moon below, and then all ships had received a message from Grand Admiral Declann aboard the great space station, declaring that the Emperor himself was aboard to witness the destruction of the rebel fleet and the final crushing of the Rebellion.

And the dream had flowed onward. *Chimaera* had hung back at first, pinning the rebels close to the forest moon, where the Death Star had begun vaporizing their mighty Mon Calamari attack cruisers one by one. In desperation,

the rebels had flung their fleet against the Empire's. The fighting was violent and fast and fierce but the rebels were gravely outnumbered, and no one, not Pellaeon or anyone else, ever doubted their victory was assured.

When that victory was over, the rebels would be gone, order and peace would rule the galaxy again and (maybe, just maybe, Pellaeon hoped) the Empire could begin the reforms it needed, reforms promised all the way back when the Republic fell, reforms that would stop corruption and reward good soldiers instead of ruthless ones to create a galaxy that really did bring safety, security, justice, and peace for all.

Pellaeon had believed in that dream until the shields around the Death Star shuddered and died. Then the nightmare began.

The rebels raced back to begin their attack on the Death Star. The Imperials chased. All those pesky tiny rebel snubfighters began snaking their way through the half-completed superstructure, seeking out its vulnerable power core. Brave Imperial pilots gave chase but for *Chimaera* and the rest of the fleet, all they could do was hang close over the Death Star and continue the fiery brawl.

The nightmare had dragged them deeper and deeper in. Pellaeon could feel the tightness in his own chest and the dread in his stomach, see it all in the faces of his crew. Their calm confidence had vanished in an instant. Soon rebel bombers had taken out *Pride of Tarlandia*, the *Allegiance*-class star destroyer managing communications for the fleet. Then the massive old *Praetor II*-class battleship *Ilthmar's First* had taken a series of crippling blows, and Admiral Harrsk had been hauled off to a bacta tank with life-threatening injuries.

Finally, the rebel fleet had turned all fire on Admiral Piett's flagship, *Executor*. In the end, one out-of-control A-wing had been enough to slay the giant.

And now, as Pellaeon stood before *Chimaera's* primary viewport, watching *Executor* plunge to her death, it still felt

like a surreal, impossible nightmare from which there would be no awakening.

The vessel's pointed tip hit the Death Star first. A great explosion tore through the station's superstructure as the destroyer kept falling. Soon a chain of explosions began racing up *Executor's* hull, all nineteen kilometers of it, until the flames reached its power core. The detonation was so bright Pellaeon had to shield his eyes.

For a long, awful, timeless moment, no one on *Chimaera's* bridge could say a word.

Then, behind him, Pellaeon heard Admiral Strage shout, "Man your stations, people! Man your stations!"

Pellaeon spun around. The admiral was in the middle of the bridge, barking orders to the stunned crew. When the dark-haired man's eyes fell on Pellaeon, he said, "Captain! Mind your ship!"

"Yes, sir!" Pellaeon snapped. "Of course, sir!"

Strage scowled and stalked off to the far end of the crew pit to give orders to the fighter wings. He was a big man but he made small, fast, nervous movements. Pellaeon realized then that the admiral might now be the ranking officer in the fleet. Firmus Piett was dead. Blitzer Harrsk was out of the fight. They hadn't heard from any of the grand admirals on the Death Star since the battle began.

They hadn't heard anything from the Emperor at all.

As Pellaeon moved for the crew pit, another voice called across the bridge: "Sir! Incoming message from the Death Star! It's Grand Admiral Declann!"

Pellaeon and Strage both hurried over to the communications station. *Chimaera's* first officer, a young lieutenant named Reige, was bent over the console.

Strage arrived right before Pellaeon and barked, "Put him on, Lieutenant!"

"Yes, sir." Reige flicked the switch, then brushed a strand of black hair off her face.

A small, shuddering blue hologram appeared over the console. Pellaeon had never seen Grand Admiral Declann in

person but the man's dark complexion and white uniform with braided epaulets made him easy to recognize.

"Admiral Strage," Declann said, "You are now in command of this fleet. Begin moving your ships away from the Death Star at once."

"Away?" Strage frowned. "Sir, I don't--"

"The rebels have infiltrated the inside of the Death Star. We can no longer guarantee the station's integrity. I've just ordered all crew to evacuate."

Pellaeon had no love for supersized battle stations that attracted rebel attacks like fleas, but that was too much. First *Executor*, now the Death Star itself.

Strage must have felt shock too, but he didn't show it. "As you command, sir."

"What about the other grand admirals?" Pellaeon interjected.

Strage shot him a glance but Declann said, "Takel, Makati, and Teshik have started evacuations."

If three or four grand admirals suddenly joined the fleet it wouldn't clarify the chain of command much. Strage asked, "Sir, what about the Emperor and Lord Vader?"

There was a tiny, awful pause. Then Declann said, "Dead. Both of them."

Even Strage was too stunned to speak. Pellaeon could see it now, even through the flickering miniature hologram: the grief on Declann's face, the weariness in his eyes.

He could even hear the hopelessness in Declann's voice as the grand admiral said, "You have your orders. Carry them out."

"Yes, sir!" Strage snapped a salute, and the comm line went dead.

Reige looked out the forward viewport at the half-finished sphere of the Death Star as though waiting for it to burst. Strage said, "Lieutenant, open a channel to all ships in the fleet. Now."

As Reige hurried to comply, Pellaeon asked, "What are you going to tell them, sir?"

"What they need to know for now," Strage swallowed. "The rest can come later."

Pellaeon had to agree, though he knew *later* might come very soon if those rebel fighters really did land a hit on the Death Star's main reactor core.

"Sir, we're ready," Reige said.

Before Strage could begin, someone from the tactical station shouted, "Sirs, we have incoming!"

Pellaeon looked across the bridge to the tactical holo. One of those Mon Cal cruisers was coming right for *Chimaera* and the destroyer on its port flank, *Adjudicator*.

"See to it, Captain," Strage rasped. "I have an announcement to make."

And like a good soldier, Pellaeon followed orders. They were all he had left.

Tycho Celchu took a deep breath as his A-wing fighter burst free of the Death Star's superstructure. The tight confines of the station's tangled insides fell away in an instant and suddenly he was soaring through open space, leaving the maze far behind.

He glanced at his scanners and made sure, one last time, that no TIE fighters had followed him. He'd branched off from the main attack to draw pursuers away from Wedge Antilles and Lando Calrissian; now all he could do was trust them to kill the reactor. He found that he really did; before going into battle, Wedge had told him that after getting so close to killing a Death Star the first time around, he really wanted to bag the second.

Tycho flicked two switches on his communication console and called, "This is Green Three. Are you there, Green Leader? Repeat, this is Celchu. Are you there?"

When he got no reply, he tried a broader frequency. "Green Squad, are you there? Can you read me?"

Still nothing. His A-wing lanced further ahead. He scanned the battle ahead and was surprised to see some of the Imperial vessels turning away from the Death Star, as if

in retreat. Somehow the battle seemed *thinner* than before, smaller, and then he realized the massive nineteen-kilometer dagger of *Executor* was nowhere to be found.

"Green Squad, are you there?" he repeated. "Anyone? What happened to *Executor*? Did it run?"

There was one thing left to try. He glanced at his console and manually punched in the freq for Red Squadron. He'd been placed on Green Squad's roster at the last minute and stuck in the cockpit of an A-wing, but he was at home in an X-wing and Red Squad was his family. If *they* were gone too-

"Red Squad, this is Green Three," he snapped, trying to force his apprehension away. "Repeat, this is Celchu. Is anyone there?"

"Glad you made it out in one piece," a familiar voice said in his earpiece. "Thought you wouldn't."

"Don't listen to Hobbie," Wes Janson joined in. "The man wouldn't know optimism if it smacked him on the butt."

"Wes, Hobbie, where are you guys?"

"We're with *Serenity*. Can you spot us?"

Tycho glanced at his scanners. It was hard to make out anything from that jumble of green and red markers. Then he saw the one denoting the Mon Cal cruiser. It was on an intercept course for a pair of Impstars and it looked like Red Squad was flying cap for them.

"On my way," Tycho said, and gunned his A-wing's oversized engines. As his cockpit rattled in acceleration, he asked, "What happened to Green Squad? I can't hail them."

"Green Squad got torn up attacking the super star destroyer," Hobbie said.

"What happened to *Executor*? I can't see it."

"It's dead," Janson said. "Green Leader rammed the bridge. The whole thing fell into the Death Star."

Tycho was speechless. *Executor* had been Vader's flagship, the scourge of the rebel fleet for the past four years. It had been as much the face of the Empire's menace as the Death Star itself.

“Anything from Wedge?” he asked, suddenly remembering the friend he’d left behind.

“Nothing yet,” Janson said. “Looks like those Imps are starting to bug out. Maybe they know something.”

The elegantly organic-looking *Serenity* began to fill Tycho’s view. He spotted a flight of X-wings on its starboard flank and settled behind them. Two star destroyers lay dead ahead. Both seemed to be attempting a pivot away from the Death Star but the MC80a cruiser was pounding them both with a mix of green turbolaser blast and concussion missile barrages.

“Nice of you to join us,” Janson called from up ahead. Tycho could easily spot his X-wing for the checker-board black-and-yellow paint job.

“Nice to have friends to join,” Tycho said.

The gravelly voice of *Serenity*’s commander came over his headset. “All fighters, we have TIE interceptors coming at our starboard flank. Request assistance.”

“That’s what we’re here for,” Janson said. “Red Squad, bring ‘er around. Let’s keep those interceptors off *Serenity*’s back.”

Tycho followed behind Janson and Hobbie’s quad-engine flares as they spun to face the stars. For a second Tycho couldn’t see the approaching fighters. Rebel pilots called the new interceptors ‘squints,’ both for their inward-canted, dagger-like solar panels and for the fact that they could be a lot harder to see against the backdrop of space.

But they were on his scanners, and they were coming fast.

“Forward shields on full,” Janson commanded. “Let ‘em take the first pass, then break around and take ‘em from behind.”

Tycho clicked his confirmation and raised his shields to full. They weren’t as strong as an X-wing’s but his A-wing was also a smaller target, and he’d be faster on the turn-around.

They were racing toward a head-on collision with the TIE interceptor wing, and it wasn’t until they’d nearly met that

the squints announced themselves with a hailstorm of landing green plasma. Tycho did his best to dodge the attack but they still splattered all over his shields and for a moment obscured his view.

Then the TIE formation hit theirs. They broke, the TIEs broke, and he almost smashed head-on into one of the fighters. Another pilot wasn't so lucky; he heard a short cry over him comlink, then static, and saw a fireball tumbling through space, trailing S-foils and black dagger-shaped solar panels.

One chunk of a panel spun in front of him. It flashed in his vision for only a second but he recognized it instantly: a scarlet bloodstripe running across the black.

He spun his A-wing onto the back of a TIE interceptor and attempted to lace it with laser blasts. The ship danced nimbly to avoid them and made a sharp starboard turn, flashing the bloodstripes on the side of its panels.

"Hobbie!" Tycho barked. "You see it?"

"I do," the other pilot growled.

"What?" asked Janson, "What is it?"

"Those bloodstripes," Hobbie said. "These are the One-Eighty-First."

For once, Janson had nothing to say. The 181st had earned its reputation as the Empire's most elite fighter wing, largely thanks to the efforts of its commanding officer, General Baron Soontir Fel.

When he'd been at the Imperial Academy, Tycho had trained under Fel. So had Hobbie. He knew how the man thought, how he fought. Against any other pilot that would have made him feel better about the fight, but not Baron Fel.

"Let's form up tight," he said, "And hope we get through this."

Turr Phennir snapped his interceptor into a tight roll, just in time to avoid a splatter of laser-blasts that would have torn through his port solar panel. He pulled up steeply and settled on the side of his wing leader.

"Sir," he called, "They're coming after us, the whole flight."

"As expected, Blue One." General Baron Soontir Fel's voice was clipped, controlled, betraying none of the stress of a tight dogfight.

"Recommendations, sir?" Phennir tensed as he looked at his scanners. The X-wings, plus their sole, out-of-place A-wing wingmate, were wheeling around to attack them from behind as they plunged toward the Mon Cal cruiser now battering *Chimaera* and *Adjudicator*.

After a half-second's consideration, Fel said, "Red and Gold on the cruiser. Blue and Silver squads, on me."

Phennir clicked acknowledgement. Battling the fighter screen was going to be messy, but at least he'd have his commander at his side.

He followed Fel's lead and veered away from the battle just as he saw a volley of concussion missiles from *Serenity* slip through *Adjudicator*'s shields and tear into its hull, igniting plasma stores beneath its starboard batteries.

But when he turned away it fell out of his mind, just like the sudden retreat order, the evacuation of the Death Star, all the good lives lost with *Executor* and *Pride of Tarlandia*, everything else except the battle right in front of him.

Fel's training had forged instincts and reflexes, and his nimble starfighter danced around the spray of quad-laser bursts from the closest X-wing. He let the X-wing fly past, then pulled into a tight spin and came around behind the ship. His lasers splattered against the X-wing's shields until one volley broke through and tore up its top-port S-foil. The ship's four engines still flared as it executed a steep dive. Phennir pulled down after it-

-and his proximity alarms started wailing. He spun his fighter into a corkscrew and pulled back up. He spared a tiny glance at his scanners and saw a concussion missile fired by that lone A-wing spiraling toward him.

The missile was closing fast. Unlike the X-wings, he had no chaff to fire to distract the warhead's tracing systems. He

kept hugging the joystick to his chest, even as g-forces slammed him back into his chair and threatened to squeeze the breath from his lungs.

Blackness was creeping into his vision when he heard Fel's voice say: "Break port, *now!*"

He broke out of his dive. A hail of green laser-blasts sliced through the space behind him. The missile flew right into the hail, collided, and exploded brilliantly.

"Thank you, sir," Phennir breathed.

"Thank me later, Turr. Follow me."

Phennir leveled out and adjusted course. He settled right behind Fel's interceptor and its two wingmen. The four of them dove after a trio of rebel fighters: two X-wings and that damned A-wing.

He knew it was petty, but he said, "Requesting to target the edge, sir."

"Understood. We'll take the pointers."

Phennir kicked his interceptor forward and fired a series of blasts at the A-wing. As expected, the ship broke starboard. Fel and his flight chased the X-wings port. Even as he vectored after the A-wing, Phennir saw Fel's first volley tear through the nose of the rear X-wing, just a meter ahead of its torpedo magazine, and send it spinning forward, tattered bow wheeling over stern.

Phennir threw all his attention on the A-wing. He'd never faced any of the new rebel fighters until this battle and they were as nimble as he'd heard. They were also damned small targets, even if their two blazing oversized Novaldex thrust engines were easy to spot.

He matched the A-wing turn-for-turn, sometimes getting lucky enough to splatter plasma bursts across its aft shields. The ship was infuriatingly hard to get a lock on and for once he wished the Empire saw fit to arm its fighters with cumbersome missile magazines like the rebels did.

The A-wing began to veer left and right and Phennir scissored in opposite directions, taking shots at every turn. He sometimes clipped the A-wing but never quite broke

through its shields. He knew all he needed was one good shot to get through; that would be enough to blow the tiny starfighter apart. He just couldn't *do* it-

A bright light flared to starboard, brilliant enough to draw his attention from the A-wing. He kicked his fighter slightly to port and saw an enormous fireball spreading in every direction over the verdant moon of Endor.

For a second he didn't understand what he was seeing. He couldn't allow himself to.

Then Fel's voice shouted over his headset: "All ships, fall back! I repeat, fall back! The Death Star has been destroyed!"

It was like *Executor*, he thought. Like that, but *so* much worse. So many good men have been onboard that station. Thousands, maybe *millions*, all wiped out in an instant by rebel terrorists.

"General," another pilot, Silver flight's leader, said, "What about the Emperor? Is he alive?"

Awful, stunned silence filled the comm line. First *Executor*, then the Death Star, then the Emperor himself, all in a single day. It was too much. It was like a hole had been torn through the universe. Nothing could fill it, nothing.

"All ships, fall back," Fel repeated.

No one argued. No one asked questions. They turned and ran, leaving the Death Star's wreckage to burn in space behind them. It felt like a funeral pyre for the Emperor, or perhaps the Empire itself.

The bridge of the gunship *Torktarak* was a bedlam. Its Dornean crew, normally methodical and stoic in their people's fashion, broke into cheers, hugged, clapped, and even wept for joy.

Captain Etahn A'baht stared at the Death Star's dying fires and didn't know what to feel. He'd fought the Empire for twenty years, helping the Dornean Navy repel sporadic expeditions into their territory by Imperial task forces. Despite it, the Rebel Alliance's battle against the Empire

had always seemed a distant thing. His far-flung homeworld had not been part of the Old Republic and was hesitant to cast its lot with an organization aiming to create a new one. When the Alliance had put out a call for ships to aid one critical offensive, Dornea had finally agreed to send two new *Braha'tok*-class gunships to aid the fight.

Even then, A'baht hadn't expected to witness, first-hand, the death of the Empire.

No, he reminded himself, even as the cheers went on. Death of the Emperor, perhaps, but not the Empire. Not yet. There were still over a dozen Imperial star destroyers over Endor, and only a fool would expect them all to lay down arms.

A'baht stalked over to the communications station and asked the lieutenant there, "Do we have orders from *Home One*?"

"Nothing, sir," Lieutenant Kaeori shook her head.

Unlike most of *Torktarak's* crew, she was a human, part of a group that had fled to Dornean space after the Empire ravaged their homeworld. Dorneans were generally prickly about welcoming outsiders, but these refugees were more eager than anyone to fight the Empire. This human was young though, maybe too young to have even seen Bavinyar herself.

There were tears of joy in Kaeori's eyes, but she wiped them away and said, "Captain, sir, a message from *Braha'tok*."

A'baht allowed a weary smile. "Put it on."

A holographic image of the ship's captain, another thick-bodied, violet-skinned Dornean, appeared over Kaeori's console and A'baht leaned close to listen over the chaos on the bridge.

"Can you hear me, Etahn?" Kiles L'toth seemed to be shouting over his own clamor.

"Well enough," A'baht nodded. "Congratulations, Kiles."

"I was about to tell you the same thing. What now? Have you gotten any orders?"

“Not yet. I just hope they don’t celebrate so much they let the Imperials get the upper hand.”

“It looks like they’re already trying to withdrawal. Etahn, I think-”

“Sir,” Kaeori interrupted, “Incoming from *Home One*.”

“Excellent. Sorry, Kiles.”

The captain’s holo cut-off mid-nod and winked out. A second later a new image appeared. Instead of Admiral Ackbar or another of his bulbous-eyed Mon Cal officers, A’baht found himself staring at a thin, weathered human face with narrowed eyes and not a touch of happiness about it.

“Admiral Nantz,” A’baht said, “Thank you for contacting us. Congratulations. You’ve fought for this harder than we have.”

“You and L’toth have new orders,” Nantz said without prelude. Ackbar could be gracious and diplomatic, but this old human was always blunt and succinct to the point of rudeness. A’baht rather liked that about him; honesty was a virtue in a military commander.

“We’re ready, Admiral.” A’baht tried to ignore the jubilant chaos behind him.

“We’ve detected several Imperial destroyers that managed to escape the Death Star before it was destroyed.”

“They escaped the blast radius too?”

“Just barely. We’ve identified one of them as the *Eleemosynary*.”

A’baht remembered it, if only for the strange name. “That ship is assigned to Grand Admiral Teshik, correct?”

Nantz nodded. “We’re already sending one cruiser and two frigates to intercept. You and L’toth are close enough to get there first.”

“Understood,” A’baht nodded. “We’ll hold them until they get the big guns in.”

“Good. *Home One*, out.”

Nantz’s image flickered out. A’baht put a hand on Kaeori’s shoulder, as much to steady himself as to steady her.

“Can you relay those orders to *Braha'tok*, Lieutenant?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Tell Kiles to follow my lead.”

The young human frowned. “What will you be doing, sir?”

A'baht looked over his shoulder at all those blissful faces. “To steal one of your peoples' phrases, I'm going to hurl a bucket of cold water.”

Even as ion cannon blasts stabbed into *Adjudicator's* hull and sent crackling blue lightning through her hull, *Chimaera* turned away and fled. There was nothing to be done for the other ship; they could only save themselves.

The order to fall back had come from Admiral Strage himself, and if pressed Pellaeon would have given it too, but he still didn't have to like it. The rebel vultures would pick apart *Adjudicator's* corpse, or maybe even refit the damaged hull and use it themselves.

The Mon Cal cruiser kept coming though. It crested the broken star destroyer and continued to fire at *Chimaera's* aft as she fled toward the outer edge of Endor's orbit.

The rebel fleet didn't seem to be savoring their incredible victory; they were already in motion, determined to destroy as many retreating ships as possible before they escaped into hyperspace.

Poor, beleaguered Admiral Strage was bent low over the communications console, saying, “I don't *care* if Admiral Harrsk is incapacitated! Command falls to *me* now! That's a direct order from Grand Admiral Declann! No, I *don't* know if Declann escaped. I told you where to regroup, now do it!”

Strage angrily flicked off the console. He turned to Pellaeon, still scowling, and asked, “Is *Serenity* still coming after us?”

“I'm afraid so,” Pellaeon swallowed. “Should we recall fighters?”

“No,” Strage waved a hand. “We need them to help cover our retreat.”

“When we reach the regrouping point, sir, what then?”

Strage’s scowl didn’t relax, but something empty overtook his eyes. The admiral projected confidence but he was as lost as any of them. Palpatine had been the dominating force in Galactic history for almost forty years; Pellaeon could barely remember anyone else being in charge.

Lieutenant Reige stepped up, snapped a salute, and said, “Admiral, sir, we’ve picked up a few star destroyers that have escaped the Death Star before it was destroyed.”

Pellaeon felt a surge of hope. If Declann or one of the other grand admirals could assert definite control, they might have a fighting chance.

“Do we have identification?” he asked.

“Yes, sir. They include *Steadfast* and *Eleemosynary*.” Those ships belonged to Grand Admirals Makati and Teshik, assuming either of them had gotten onboard in time. Pellaeon felt something almost like confidence.

“Can we hail them?” Strage asked.

“Uncertain, sir. The rebels are moving on them fast and putting up jamming signals.”

“Sirs,” the tactical lieutenant called, “*Steadfast* is breaking away!”

“Breaking how?” Strage scowled. He hurried across the bridge to the tactical station, leaving Pellaeon and Reige to scamper after him.

The lieutenant pointed at the holo. “She’s curving around the sanctuary moon, sir. It looks like she’s trying to place it between her and the rebel fleet.”

“But *why*?” Pellaeon asked.

“Makati’s fleeing,” Strage sneered.

“We don’t know the grand admiral’s on board,” Pellaeon insisted.

“Sirs!” the comm officer called, “Incoming from Grand Admiral Teshik!”

Pellaeon almost ran across the bridge, Reige right behind him. Strage lingered for a moment to give one last order to the tactical lieutenant before turning to follow.

At that moment, a missile from *Serenity* slipped through *Chimaera*'s shields and impacted at the base of the ship's command tower. The bridge shuddered, throwing Pellaeon to the deck. Reige grabbed him by the shoulder to help him up just as an ion cannon blast hit the ship and sent blue lightning sparking through its control systems.

The overhead lights died suddenly, plunging the bridge into darkness. Energy danced across control panels; unlucky crewmen jumped back or fell down in pain as electric energy jolted their bodies. The stars, the smoldering debris, the flashing laser-blasts were suddenly perfectly visible outside.

Then there was a deep groaning noise as the ship's backup power kicked on. Dim emergency lights came on over the bridge, casting everything in a sickly blood-red pallor.

"Sitrep!" Pellaeon shouted as another shot, maybe a turbolaser blast, impacted somewhere on the ship and rocked the deck.

Section lieutenants bounced reports back at him. The command tower still ran on backup power but the rest of the ship was operating from the main generator. Bridge shields were down but a fighter squad was on the way to cover. The starboard gun battery had taken severe damage and was still firing, but at half efficiency.

It still sounded too good to be true. Pellaeon turned to the tactical station to ask what *Serenity* was doing, only to see no one manning the console.

Then his eyes dropped to the deck. The lieutenant was lying face-down and still. Admiral Strage was face-up, twitching, his face contorted in pain.

"Admiral!" Pellaeon shouted and half-skidded down to his knees next to Strage.

The big man shuddered as though stricken by a seizure. One hand seemed to be grasping for something on his face, but Pellaeon couldn't understand what or why.

Then he remembered that Strage had an artificial neural shunt in his brain, implanted after an aneurysm three years

back. The lightning from the ion blast must have leaped up his body and broken the shunt.

“Medic!” Pellaeon called. “We need a medic!”

He heard someone behind him calling for help. Strage’s big body kept convulsing. A trickle of foam, barely visible in the red light, trickled from his mouth.

“Medic!” Pellaeon shouted so loud his throat scraped.

A hand clamped on his shoulder. He looked up to see Reige behind him. The woman’s dark eyes were sunk into her pale face.

“Captain,” his first officer said, “We need you at the comm station!”

Teshik. He’d totally forgotten. “But the admiral-”

“I called the medic, sir, but I don’t know what we can do.”

“We can’t-”

“Captain, *please!*”

He was right. Orders from the grand admiral were worth more than Strage’s life. They could be worth the lives of every Imperial over Endor.

Reige helped him stand. Pellaeon staggered over to the comm station and said, “Put him on. *Now.*”

“One minute sir,” the comm officer frowned. “The jamming’s still strong. We had him, then we lost him, then we- Ah!”

A shrunken blue holo sprung up in front of him. The image staring up at Pellaeon was of half a man: Teshik had been grievously injured in a fight against the Hapans and had survived only thanks to extensive cybernetic grafting. Pellaeon found himself looking at a face that was split almost down the middle: one half machinery, the other flushed skin and bristly hair and beady eye. The pale uniform and braided epaulets, however, commanded instant loyalty.

“Grand Admiral!” Pellaeon snapped a salute. “This is Captain Pellaeon from *Chimaera*, sir.”

“Can you hear this transmission?” Teshik asked. He seemed to speak with two voices at once, human and

mechanical in perfect sync. Pellaeon had never met him in person and didn't know if the audio link was malfunctioning or if that was his real voice.

"Ah, yes sir, I can." Dimly, Pellaeon realized the ship was no longer shuddering from enemy attacks. *Serenity* must have pulled back.

"What happened to Admiral Strage?"

He looked back the comm station. A white-garbed medic had arrived and was bending over the body, but it no longer convulsed. He glanced at Reige, who shook her head.

"Admiral Strage is dead, sir."

"Understood," Teshik nodded, but before he could say anything else, his image dissolved in static.

"Damn it!" Pellaeon snapped. "Put him on again!"

"I'm trying, sir," the comm officer grimaced as he worked the controls.

"There was nothing we could have done for the admiral, sir," Reige told him.

"I know that!" Pellaeon snapped. He had to believe Reige. Deaths cascaded one after another today and he couldn't dwell on any of them for long.

"I have it, Captain!" the comm officer said, and a second later, Teshik had reappeared.

"Sir," Pellaeon said, "What happened to the other grand admirals? Is Makati-"

"He's falling back to Coruscant, on orders of Vizier Pestage," Teshik's voice scraped. "Takel is with him."

"And Grand Admiral Declann-"

"Dead."

There was no remorse in Teshik's voice, just the mechanical statement of fact. They'd said the grand admiral was cold, more droid than man. Maybe he needed to be; maybe then *all* needed to be. The deaths kept coming and somehow, he knew this horrible day wasn't over yet.

"Captain Pellaeon," Teshik said, "*You* are in command now."

"Me?" he gaped. "But sir-"

“The rebels are converging on my ship. They want to claim another head today.”

“I’m- I’m sorry, sir. Our tactical station is down. We can’t read-”

“The rebels are still trying to jam my communications. Give the order for all ships to fall back to the nearest sector base.”

“Sir?”

“Do it, Captain! Give the order! Now!”

“But what about you, sir?”

“I’ll hold the rebels off for as long as I can.”

Teshik had never had a reputation for bravery or selflessness, but Pellaeon could think of nothing else to call his actions.

“Will you give the order, Captain?” Teshik asked impatiently. His holo blurred to static, came back again.

“Yes, sir.” Pellaeon snapped a salute. “Thank you, sir.”

Teshik simply nodded, and the holo flicked off.

Pellaeon lowered his hands to his side. Breath hissed out of him. He felt like his entire body had instantly deflated.

“Captain?” Reige frowned. “Are you going to call the retreat?”

From his first officer’s voice, Pellaeon couldn’t tell whether the woman wanted it or not. When the fight began, the suggestion that the chain of command would have led down to Pellaeon would have seemed comically absurd, but they’d fallen one after another: Palpatine, Vader, Declann, Teshik, Piett, Harrsk, Strage, all the way down to *Chimaera*’s lowly captain.

It was too much loss for one man to comprehend. His voice rasped in his throat. “Get me a signal to all ships.”

After a second, the comm lieutenant said, “Ready, sir.”

“All ships, this is *Chimaera*. The order is to retreat to the Annaj system. Repeat, all ships are to escape the Endor system as soon as possible.”

He felt *Chimaera*’s deck shudder slightly as it adjusted course. Pellaeon stepped away from the console and looked

at Reige. The young lieutenant's face was empty of everything: shock, fear, regret, sadness, even simple exhaustion.

He looked across the bridge and saw the same emptiness on the faces of his surviving crew. He was sure they mirrored his own.

Grand Admiral Teshik's flagship hung in space against a stunning backdrop: the twisted wreckage of the Death Star, the calm green glow of Endor's moon, the silver swirls of the gas giant beyond. *Eleemosynary's* pale diamond profile was pushing away from it all, but the rebel ships were swarming to meet it. Two swift gunships of an unfamiliar type had raced in first to block its escape; they shuddered under repeated volleys from the star destroyer's guns but kept up attacks of their own. Apparently Teshik had not had a chance to load up on starfighters when fleeing the Death Star; if he had, a few squads of interceptors could have made short work of the gunships.

As it was, they were just the opening stage of a longer slog. The cruiser *Serenity* pulled away from its attack on *Chimaera* and vectored toward Teshik's destroyer. So, too, did another big Mon Cal ship and a pair of swifter assault frigates, remade from the hulls of old dreadnaughts.

The frigates got there first, allowing the battered gunships to pull back. Teshik made a valiant attempt to push past them, and broke the spine of one frigate, but even as *Eleemosynary* pulled ahead, the two Mon Cal cruisers cut in front of it and began raining salvos of concussion missiles on its hull. *Eleemosynary's* forward shields began to crumble but she kept firing and would keep firing for a while longer: at over two kilometers long, the *Allegiance*-class destroyer was more than twice the size of any rebel ship and probably could have fought through everything thrown at it with the assistance of a full fighter wing.

That was the thought that repeated itself over and over to Turr Phennir as he watched the fight in the rear sensors of

his TIE interceptor. Even after the order to retreat came down from *Chimaera*, Fel had ordered the 181st to stay at the rear of the fight, deflecting rebel attacks until the last minute. Even as they sent more and more ships after Teshik, they still had plenty to spare for the remaining fifteen Imperial destroyers.

The first ship to escape the system wasn't *Chimaera*, but Admiral Harrsk's massive command ship, *Ilthmar's Fist*. Watching the four-kilometer-long gray wedge wink into nothing signaled to Phennir that the nightmare really was ending. Other destroyers crossed out of the gravity well and after that, and one after another they jumped to safety.

Despite having taken several major hits from *Serenity*, *Chimaera* stayed back at the rear of the retreat, absorbing enemy fire and handing out some of its own. The 181st did their best to pick off B- and Y-wing attack craft, some of which were arrogant enough to attempt dead-on bombing runs on destroyer command towers. Killing them felt good, but Phennir knew it did nothing to even the score after such an awful battle. Still, his shock had turned to anger. He needed revenge any way he could get it.

Calling two wingmen to follow, he dropped himself behind a half squadron of two-seater Y-wings attempting a run at the destroyer *Relentless*. The wishbones' gun turrets swiveled to fire back, and one ion blast took Phennir's port wingman. He immediately shifted his attack to that vessel and speared green plasma through its shields, bursting the cockpit and turning it into a tumbling fireball.

The other Y-wings attempted to break after that. Phennir's wingman took two while Phennir took the other ones. He clipped the port engine pylon of one ship and sent it tumbling downward into *Relentless*' shields. The other wishbone aborted its bombing run and pulled away, but Phennir followed, bobbing and dancing to avoid blasts from the Y-wing's turret gun.

He dropped his reticule on the Y-wing's cockpit and prepared to fire when red plasma shot across the front of his

ship. He broke away immediately and checked his scanners to see on X-wing coming after him from the starboard side. He rolled and tumbled down toward *Relentless* but the X-wing followed. He leveled out before hitting the destroyer's shields but the damned pointer stayed on his tail, firing quad-linked red laser blasts that shot past his ball cockpit after every hand-breadth dodge.

Suddenly the shooting stopped. The X-wing winked off his scanner. Then his commander's voice said in his headset: "That was good flying, Turr, but if you'd been watching your back I wouldn't have had to rescue you."

Phennir laughed in relief. "Won't happen again, sir."

"I should hope not," Baron Fel said. "Fall back to *Relentless*, Blue One. We're done here."

Phennir clicked agreement and followed Fel's interceptor. Both ships swooped beneath *Relentless* and clung beneath the destroyer's flat white belly as they raced for its hangar bay. He checked his scanners: the only ships left were *Relentless*, *Chimaera*, and *Death's Head*, and all of them would be ready to jump within a minute.

They would jump and leave Grand Admiral Teshik behind.

They would leave him to die.

Phennir's interceptor locked into place in *Relentless*' hangar. As he clambered out of his cockpit and onto the gangway, he pulled off his black helmet and sucked in the destroyer's cool circulated air. It was the sweetest stuff he'd ever breathed, but it didn't take his anger away.

There was plenty to be angry about, but he found it fell on Teshik most of all. With proper support the grand admiral could have survived, taken command of the fleet, maybe even turned the battle around and wrecked the rebel fleet after they'd let victory go to their heads. He'd never served under Teshik, didn't know what he was like, but grand admirals were supposed to be miracle-workers.

They'd needed a miracle. They still did. The chance for one was gone. They'd turned their backs on it, ran, and left it to die.

Phennir leaned against the gangway railing, squeezing it hard with both hands as he stared down at the busy hangar bay. The frenzy seemed to make his eyes swim. It was only when he felt a cold tinkle on his face, running down his cheek to the scar that ran from his nose to mouth, that he realized they were tears.

As he wiped his face clean, a strong hand clamped down on his shoulder. He jerked it free, then turned to see Soontir Fel looking down at him. The man's dark eyes were hollow; his face looked exhausted and pale despite the half-beard clinging to his squared jaw.

There was nothing they could say to each other. There was nothing any of them could have said. Busy as the hangar was, barely any voices could be heard. Machines clunked and clanked along; they seemed to echo mournfully in the vast landing bay.

Phennir bowed his head and leaned forward, until the crown of his gold hair rested against Fel's chest. His body sagged forward but Fel did not move. They didn't reach out to touch each other. They remained frozen where they were. When Phennir's vision started to blur against he squeezed his eyes shut, sealing away light and tears.

He barely noticed as *Relentless* lurched into hyperspace, taking them far away from Endor, but not from the disaster that had struck them down.

Even after Endor's forest moon turned to face the night sky, the debris from the Second Death Star arced across the sky like a gleaming rainbow. It looked strangely beautiful against a backdrop of winking stars, and as he stared up at them, Tycho tried to imagine what the moon's furry, primitive natives must have thought of it. It might have seemed like a blessing from their gods.

"That's going to fall and kill us all you know," Hobbie said beside him. "It'll come plummeting to the planet and destroy the biosphere. Mass extinction. All those cute little Ewoks. Dead."

Tycho looked at him. Hobbie Klivian had his head tilted back and his shoulders against the trunk of one of Endor's thick trees. Firelight and people danced beyond him in the night. Laughter, drums, and woodwinds drifted through the forest and filled the night with jubilant noise.

From Tycho's other side, Janson said, "You've got a talent for sucking the life out of any party, you know that?"

"I try," Hobbie said, deadpan.

"They're doing clean-up on that stuff," Tycho pointed out. "Right as we speak. We've got half the fleet using their tractor beams to haul all the debris a safe distance from the moon's orbit."

"They can't get everything," said Hobbie. He sounded almost happy about it.

"Okay, *some* of it might fall," Tycho allowed. "But no mass extinction. Not while we're down here, anyway."

"Aw, you're no fun."

"Thank you."

Tycho smiled a little and removed the flask from his jacket pocket. He took a gulp, then screwed the cap back on. "You know what I think, Hobbie?"

"Ooh, I can't wait to hear this," Janson murmured.

"I think you hate Ewoks, Hobbie. I think that's why you're getting and fuzzy and warm at the thought of Ewok xenocide, right after our greatest victory. It's cruel, really. You might want to see a psychologist about your sadistic streak."

Hobbie seemed to consider that, very seriously, before finally saying, "You're right, Tycho. I do hate them. They're too cute. How can I act all dour when I've got karking teddy bears running around, trying to get me to dance with them?"

"You almost looked like you had fun with those Ewoks," Janson said.

"You thought wrong."

"Oh, how disappointing," Janson blew out a sigh. "Well, at least we know Wedge had fun."

Tycho chuckled; even Hobbie snorted despite himself. The image of hard-faced Wedge Antilles, still in his bulky orange flight suit, dark hair sweat-matted to his face, joining in a dance with a bunch of fuzzy walking dolls as tall as his hip was something he would treasure all his life.

"Did someone get holos of that?" he asked.

"Ah, slipped my mind," Janson sounded truly regretful. "It would've made *great* blackmail material."

Hobbie snorted again. Tycho said, "You know, how about we just get one of those fuzzy guys in the squad?"

"What, an Ewok pilot?" Hobbie groaned.

"Hey, that's a great idea," Janson giggled. "Just give 'em a couple prosthetic so he'd reach the pedals and stick. I can just imagine his feral growl striking fear into the hearts of every Imp pilot. And when he drops behind a squint and locks on he'd send them off with his fiercest 'Yub yub, Imperial scum!'"

Janson's attempted impression of an Ewok- cute and growly at the same time- was the funniest part, and even Hobbie laughed aloud. They were still laughing when Wedge emerged from the dark, now changed out of his flightsuit and into brown trousers and a simple green jacket.

"I was wondering where you went off to," he said. "What's so funny?"

"Oh, nothing," Tycho waved a hand. "Just talking about Ewoks."

Wedge rolled his eyes. "Let's talk about something else."

"How about mass extinction?" Hobbie suggested and pointed to the debris glinting in the sky. "Should come any time now."

"No, it won't," Wedge said. "Clean-up crews are working on it."

"That's what I told him," Tycho insisted.

"Ruined my night," Hobbie sighed. "I was so looking forward to that Ewok xenocide."

After a pause, Wedge said, "They're not *that* bad."

Hobbie shrugged noncommittally.

Janson said, "You know, if anything we owe those little fuzzballs. From what I hear, we'd have never taken that shield down without them."

"Oh, it was a team effort," Wedge said. "We are a rebel *alliance*, after all. Humans, Mon Cals, Bothans, Sullustans, those Dornean guys. Even Ewoks."

"We make friends wherever we go," said Janson.

"Apparently." Wedge stuffed his hands in his jacket pockets and looked up at the sky. He murmured, "It really is pretty."

"If you can forget the threat of looming death thing," Tycho agreed. He tried to pick out specific capital ships moving high in the moon's orbit, but they were too far away to mark with his naked eyes.

After a comfortable pause, Tycho asked, "Hey, Wedge, you plan on painting a Death Star on the side of your X-wing?"

"You've earned it," Janson added.

Still looking up at the sky, Wedge shrugged and said, "Why not?"

"Lot of marks to add after today," Tycho said. "Palpatine, Vader, Piett, Declann. A Death Star, a super star destroyer, how many regular Impstars? I lost count."

"At least two captured," Hobbie said.

"Does that include Grand Admiral Teshik's ship, the once with the weird name?" asked Janson.

Wedge shook his head. "I talked with Admiral Ackbar. He doesn't think it's salvageable."

"But at least we got Teshik alive."

Wedge nodded soberly. "The question is, what we *do* with him?"

It was a damned good question. The Alliance to Restore the Republic had pledged itself to respect the lives of all beings, something the Empire never had. At the same time, the Emperor's grand admirals were the most visible signs of Imperial authority left. To solidify its victory, the Alliance would have to prioritize them next. From a certain point of

view, executing Teshik as official punishment for the larger crimes of the Empire would demonstrate that the Alliance was a government interested in administering justice instead of just a rabble. They just needed to make it clear that this *was* justice and not its messier cousin, revenge.

Palpatine's Grand Vizier, Sate Pestage, had declared his authority on Coruscant, but there was no way of knowing how much of the military would follow. Pestage had made his career as Palpatine's political lackey. Tycho doubted the grand admirals and other senior naval figures respected him.

The same thought seemed to be on everyone's minds. Hobbie said, almost apologetically, "The grand admiral fought bravely. I was impressed. He held us off for four hours, long enough for all the other Imp ships to escape."

"It doesn't matter." Janson sounded uncharacteristically serious. "He's a grand admiral. We can't just let him off the hook."

Tycho sighed and said, "So two grand admirals, one emperor, one Darth Vader, one Death Star, one flagship, and a whole lot of other stuff. I guess that's a pretty good score."

"It's not over yet," Wedge said. "Still nine more grand admirals to go. And a whole lotta Impstars."

Tycho nodded. He reached into his pocket, took out the flask, and shook it around to get a feel for the contents.

"Anyone want a mouthful?" he asked.

They all raised their hands at once. He didn't mind sharing, not with his friends, not after the long fight they'd been through. As they started to pass the flask around, Tycho leaned back against the tree behind him and closed his eyes. He thought of Alderaan and his family, all lost, and felt something close to peace.

Peace wouldn't last. There was a lot of war left to fight and they all knew it. But for now, it was good. They could savor it.

It was a long flight to Annaj, almost two days long. The remnants of the Imperial fleet needed that much time to

repair their broken vessels, stabilize their injured crewmen, and take stock of their dead.

For two days, the halls of *Chimaera* were ghostlike. When crewmen passed each other in the halls, no one spoke. They avoided each other's eyes. At first Pellaeon thought the crew was reacting that way to him specifically, but Lieutenant Reige explained that it was the same for everyone. They were all lost in their private grief.

The only one he could talk to at all about anything besides the necessary repair work was Reige, and even then, conversation stayed only to fleet politics.

"We haven't heard anything from Admiral Harrsk's ship since the retreat," Reige said once, while they were overseeing repairs on the main flight deck. The hangar bay's clanking machinery and it reduced her voice to a whisper.

"If the admiral had died, we'd have heard something," Pellaeon replied.

"We haven't hard anything from anyone," Reige frowned. "Not even from Vice Admiral Prittick."

Prittick was the commander of the sector fleet at Annaj. In theory, the chain of command went back up to him once they reached his territory, and if Harrsk was alive and functioning, the chain rode higher still.

"Sir," Reige asked cautiously, "Our scouts say the Rebels are still at Endor. They're probably licking their wounds too. They might be there for some time. What do you think we should do?"

Despite their shocking defeat and the damage they'd sustained, the fleet was still capable of turning around and attacking the rebels at Endor once more. If Prittick committed his sector fleet they'd stand an even better chance at giving back some fraction of the damage the enemy had given them.

He could tell from Reige's face what she wanted. Shock had given way to anger and anger to the cold, hard need for some recompense. Pellaeon understood it all, had gone through all of it himself.

"I'll recommend we return to Endor," he said, "Though I'm not sure how much it will be worth."

"You called this retreat in the first place, sir," Reige said. Realizing how accusatory it had sounded, she added, "I don't blame you, sir. You were only following Grand Admiral Teshik's orders. But Teshik is dead, sir. We need to do *something*."

"I wholeheartedly agree, Lieutenant, which is why I'll be pressing the matter at Annaj."

"You have to make Admiral Prittick listen. He *should* listen to you," Reige insisted.

Pellaeon couldn't tell if his first officer approved of his actions or not. Like everyone else, the catastrophe at Endor had shaken up his whole world. His heart and mind had yet to settle into new places.

"I'll do what I can to protect the citizens of the Empire," He placed a hand on her shoulder, gave it one firm squeeze. "It's what I've always done."

Reige nodded, accepting but not understanding it all. She was too young.

When the fleet arrived at Annaj, Pellaeon went onto the bridge. They still hadn't received any concrete orders from Admiral Prittick and he was starting to worry that something might have befallen Annaj as well as Endor. He and Reige both stood anxiously on the deck as the helm officer counted down the seconds until their exit from hyperspace.

When the count hit zero, the blue-white blur of lightspeed fell away. Their viewport filled with the blaze of ion engines ahead of them, the blue-green sphere of the planet, and something Pellaeon had not expected at all.

It hung like a black sword over Annaj: flat and narrow with a pointed tip and a relatively wide aft engine cluster, the star destroyer stretched out to nineteen kilometers in length, the same span as the dead *Executor*, though unlike Piett's flagship, this vessel had half the total mass and a similarly smaller armament and support ship capacity.

Nonetheless, it was by far the most powerful warship hanging over Annaj, far out-gunning Admiral Harrsk's *Ilthmar's Fist*.

"Tactical," Pellaeon ordered, "Get me an ID on that ship. Now."

"One moment, sir!"

As the lieutenant fumbled through his shock, Pellaeon looked back at the black warship. From what he'd heard, only a handful super star destroyers with that distinctive design had ever been built and he'd never seen one with his own eyes. The vessel seemed almost as intimidating as *Executor* herself, and it gave him a spike of hope. With this ship, they could easily ravage the rebels still licking their wounds at Endor.

"Captain, sir," the lieutenant said, "It's the *Vengeance*."

The first of its class, then. Pellaeon recalled that the original had been commissioned and purchased by one of the Emperor's High Inquisitors, a curious being named Jerec. Some said he was a former Jedi Master from the Old Republic who'd switched sides. The handful of officers Pellaeon knew who had worked with him personally said they wouldn't do so again.

Pellaeon's own occasional missions with Force-users had gotten uneven results at best; the mystics operated outside of the normal chain of command and always seemed dead-sure that their Force-given wisdom outstripped the decades-long experience of the mundane beings they were working with. It was all the more frustrating because they were so often right.

From the comm station, Reige said, "Captain, we're getting a message from the super star destroyer. It's Vice Admiral Prittick. He's requesting you come aboard."

Pellaeon swallowed, stiffened, and said, "Understood. Did the message say who *else* was invited?"

"No, sir."

"All right, then, Prepare a shuttle. You are in command until I return, Lieutenant Reige."

“Very good, sir.”

Until. Pellaeon tried to repeat that word over and over in his head as he walked down the hall, rode the lift down to the hangar deck, boarded the shuttle, and made the crossing flight over to *Vengeance*.

His shuttle ended up part of a small queue to land in *Vengeance*'s hangar bay. When he marched onto the deck he found himself with a cluster of other senior destroyer captains, including *Relentless*' Aren Dorja and *Judicator*'s Villim Brandei. He saw, too, a broad-shouldered man with black hair and a beard, and red bloodstripes running down the sides of his black uniform. Even if he hadn't seen the man in dozens of broadcasts he'd have marked him as General Baron Soontir Fel, the Empire's most decorated flying ace and leader of the 181st Fighter Wing.

Even as a group of stormtroopers herded them into the middle of the hangar, no officers came to greet them. The entire situation put Pellaeon on edge, and he could see the others were also.

“Why doesn't anyone *come*?” Dorja looked around. “There's not even anyone to ask.”

“We can try one of the stormtroopers,” Pellaeon suggested. Like clone troopers before them, their commanding officers often forget they were real men and not droids in white armor.

Baron Fel seemed to be the only calm one. He said, “Perhaps we're simply meant to wait.”

“Wait?” asked Brandei. “Wait for what?”

Fel turned and pointed to the space beyond the hangar. Pellaeon squinted, wondering what the fighter ace's eyes could pick out that his couldn't. He saw several star destroyers drifting in orbit over Annaj, mostly *Imperial*-class like his *Chimaera*, plus a few hangar-less *Tector*-class ships and Admiral Harrsk's big *Praetor II*-class destroyer that seemed suddenly small compared to *Vengeance*.

Then he spotted it: the flare of blue ion engines, half-hidden by the three-fold wing-spread of a *Lambda*-class

shuttle. The white ship resolved out of the backdrop of Harrsk's vessel and flew straight for the hangar. Fel, Pellaeon, and the other captains stepped a little bit closer to the far wall as the shuttle folded up its wings and came to rest on the hangar deck.

They'd had no indication whether Harrsk was alive at all. The last Pellaeon had heard the man was still stuck in a bacta tank. Harrsk had never been a pleasant man in normal circumstances, and if he had just clawed his way back from serious injuries, he'd been harder to deal with than ever. Even if the admiral blamed Pellaeon for calling the retreat, the captain found he wouldn't mind it much, not as long as they went back to Endor with the appropriately-named *Vengeance*. This time the surprise would be theirs, and with it the victory.

When the shuttle's landing ramp swung down, everyone visibly tensed. Two stormtroopers came out first, then two more. Finally, Pellaeon heard the low whine of a small-scale repulsorlift, and a second after that saw Admiral Blitzer Harrsk slide down onto the flight deck. He was seated in a floating mobile chair. His right hand grasped the control stick in the chair's arm while the other rested in his lap. A breathing mask was clamped tight over his nose and mouth, but above it Pellaeon could see the fresh red scar tissue that distorted half his face.

Harrsk drifted up the group of captains. Pellaeon led them in snapping a salute.

"Captain Pellaeon," Harrsk rasped through his breathing mask.

"I called the retreat on the express orders of Grand Admiral Teshik, sir," Pellaeon said. Though a dozen officers stood at his back he knew he was alone.

"The battle is over. Your command has been nullified," Harrsk grated.

"I understand."

To his relief, Harrsk's eyes drifted away from him. The admiral asked, "Are we ready to convene?"

Pellaeon glanced over his shoulder to see a new arrival: a woman, tall and attractive, with short-cut brown hair and a fine-featured face. She wore no uniform, only a form-hiding black robe, but two columns of stormtroopers stood behind her.

“My name is Sariss,” the woman said. “Come.”

With that unhelpful introduction, she turned and walked out of the hangar. The stormtrooper columns fell in on either side of the assembled captains and herded them after her. The others quite willingly let Harrsk’s repulsor-chair skirt to the front of the line. Dorja fell in directly behind him, and then Pellaeon, and the rest followed a single-file trail through the star destroyer’s cold gray hallways. No one spoke.

The conference room was mid-sized, with just enough chairs spaced around a flat oval table. It was just like the one in *Chimaera*, but the room was charged with a potent energy Pellaeon had never felt before.

Sitting at the far end of the table was a wide-bodied man in an admiral’s uniform. Next to him was a man in black robes. A black cloth was wrapped around his bald head, obscuring his eyes, and two patterned tattoos ran from the sides of his mouth to his jaw.

Pellaeon was unsurprised when they introduced themselves as Vice Admiral Ayde Prittick and High Inquisitor Jerec.

“Please, sit,” Prittick extended his arms.

The captains awkwardly filled the seats, save for Admiral Harrsk, who brought his repulsor-chair up to the table edge on the far opposite side from Jerec and Prittick. For his part, Pellaeon placed himself between Dorja and Baron Fel.

“Thank you all for coming,” Prittick said. “I know all of you are still dealing with the loss of our Emperor. However, I believe we can work together to determine our continuing strategy in the war against the rebellion.”

“With all due respect,” Harrsk rasped, “We’ve already wasted too much time already. We should never have

retreated from Endor in the first place, we should have kept fighting!”

Jerec cleared his throat and said, “Admiral, my understanding is that you were incapacitated after an attack on your ship during the fighting. Had you not fled, you might not be alive.”

“That’s absurd.” Harrsk’s one angry eye glared across the table at the eyeless Inquisitor. “My vessel is the most powerful in the fleet. I-”

“*Was*,” Jerec said with a white smile. “*Was* the most powerful in the fleet.”

“And now this fleet is even more powerful,” Harrsk said. “With your ship, we can go back to Endor and demolish the rebels while they’re totally unprepared!”

Prittick frowned and rubbed his temple as if he had a headache. He looked at Pellaeon and said, “Captain, I understand it was you who gave the order to retreat.”

Pellaeon shifted uncomfortably as all eyes fell on him. “Yes, Admiral. I was given the retreat order by Grand Admiral Teshik. He was using his flagship to hold off the rebels in Endor’s orbit. Without him, sir, I don’t know how many of us would be here.”

He hoped the reminder of Teshik’s sacrifice would calm the mood, but Harrsk just snarled, “Your orders should never have been carried out, *Captain*. You had no authority to pull back the fleet, not while I was still alive.”

“Your crew told me you were incapacitated, sir,” Pellaeon reminded him. “Near death, they said.”

“I was *not* near death!” Harrsk barked, but immediately fell into a fit of rasping coughs. Pellaeon looked around the table for support but found few captains willing to meet his eyes.

“For what it’s worth, Admiral Harrsk,” he said, “I believe Lord Jerec’s flagship changes everything. With our current fleet capacity, I believe we can wipe out the entire rebel force still at Endor.”

"I am the ranking fleet officer here. *My* orders stand." Harrsk grated. "I'm not handing command over to some blind wizard."

Jerec seemed to respond with an eyeless glare. Prittick cleared his throat and said, "If we can agree that we should perform a counter-attack at Endor, I believe—"

"*Have* we agreed?" asked Jerec. "I remember no such concurrence."

"Well," Prittick rubbed his forehead again, "Perhaps we could vote—"

"This is the Empire!" Harrsk snapped. "We're not holding a vote! Command falls to the highest-ranking fleet officer and that is *me*."

"Excuse me," Baron Fel said. Heads swung to him. The fighter pilot lowered his hand and asked, "Have we received orders from Imperial Center yet?"

"Grand Vizier Pestage has declared himself Regent," Prittick said. "However, he hasn't yet given a direct command to this fleet... or any others."

"Pestage is no military commander," Jerec said, casually dismissive. "His authority is meaningless."

Pellaeon gaped. Those kinds of treasonous words could have warranted execution just two days ago, but looking at Jerec, he decided that man had never been afraid to speak his mind.

"You're no commander either," Harrsk said. "You were the Emperor's lackey, Lord Jerec, a second-rate Darth Vader."

Anger flared on Jerec's face for the first time. Prittick interjected, "Gentlemen, gentlemen, please. We need to come to an understanding as to our immediate situation. Do we take this fleet back to Endor or not?"

"Such an attack would be pointless." Jerec crossed his arms over his chest.

"We would have revenge," Captain Brandei spoke up. "Given how you name your ships, I thought that would be important to you, Lord Jerec."

“Revenge against what? Whatever scraps of rebel trash that are still hanging over Endor four days later?”

“Revenge against the ones who murdered Palpatine,” Captain Dorja said firmly.

Jerec put on a condescending smile. “And what good does that do our dear, late emperor?”

“This is about justice,” Baron Fel said.

“We make our own justice now,” Jerec waved a hand.

“How?” Pellaeon asked. “Lord Jerec, if you could just clarify your exact intent, it would help all of us, very much.”

The room fell silent, expectant. Everyone watched Jerec except for Prittick, who kept on rubbing his temple.

“We are going to build a new Empire, a stronger one,” Jerec said confidently. “Once we have uncovered the secrets of the lost valley of the Jedi-”

“I’ve had enough of this,” Harrsk said. He turned his repulsor-chair around and moved for the door.

“Admiral Harrsk!” Jerec leapt to his feet. “You will *not* leave this room. From this point forward, you and all your forces belong to *me*, is that understood?”

Harrsk pivoted his repulsor-chair just enough to fix Jerec with a sidelong glare. “What do you think’s going to happen here? Are you going to try and use your magic tricks on me? I’ve been transmitting the audio feed of this conversation directly to *Ilthmar’s Fist*.”

Harrsk tapped the arm of his chair and raised his voice. “Captain, if you don’t hear from me in twenty seconds, launch all starboard missile batteries and tear this ship in half.”

A stunned hush fell over the room. Pellaeon’s breath froze in his chest. Harrsk stared at Jerec, and the blind man seemed to glare back at him. The moment seemed to last an hour, but the moment ended when Harrsk said, “Captain, hold your fire for one more minute.”

He turned his chair back around and rode out of the room. Two destroyer captains popped to their feet and hurried after him. No one tried to stop him then. Pellaeon had half a

mind to join them; Harrsk seemed crueller now than ever, but at least he wanted to fight the enemy.

He looked to Dorja, still planted in his chair, face creased in confusion. He looked to Baron Fel, who had his hands folded calmly in front of him and stared directly into the opposite bulkhead in a silent rebuttal of Jerec's authority.

"This is my ship," Jerec growled, "You are all my guests. Are you all really foolish enough to throw away what I'm offering you?"

No one was as reckless as Admiral Harrsk, but Baron Fel shifted his head slightly and said, "With all due respect, High Inquisitor, I swore to protect Palpatine's empire, not whatever one you're making. I'm not ready to break my oath yet."

"Fine," Jerec sneered. "Go, then. Join Harrsk or fly off to Coruscant and hide under Pestage's skirt. I held my hand out to you, Baron. You'll regret the day you slapped it away."

"Perhaps," Fel said evenly, "But not today."

He pushed his chair back and stood. Brandei and a few more captains rose as well. Dorja rose too, and Pellaeon joined him. They turned their backs on Jerec and walked as fast as they could out of the room. Black-robed Sariss stood outside the doorway, and for a moment Pellaeon was afraid some red lightsaber would spring from her sleeve and cut them all down, but she simply stepped aside.

As they walked down the hall, Pellaeon picked up his comlink. To his surprise, his call went through.

"This is Lieutenant Reige," the woman on the opposite end said. "Captain Pellaeon, is that you?"

"We're leaving *Vengeance* now, Lieutenant. Report."

"Captain, sir, Admiral Harrsk is already returning to *Ilthmar's Fist*. He's sent out a message inviting all ships to join him in the Deep Core."

"The Deep Core?" Dorja said from Pellaeon's shoulder. "What happened to Endor?"

"What do we do now, sir?" Reige asked.

Pellaeon hesitated. Without *Ilthmar's Fist* or *Vengeance*, a counterattack on the rebel fleet would have small chance of success.

"We do what we've always done," Fel answered for him. "We protect the citizens of the Empire."

"What Empire?" Dorja muttered under his breath.

Pellaeon didn't have an answer for that. He told Reige, "Lieutenant, prepare the ship for a flight to Imperial Center."

"Yes sir," Reige said, and ended the connection.

Pellaeon stuffed the comlink into his pocket and kept walking. The tension in the room behind them lingered with the officers who had escaped. For a moment Pellaeon felt like they were in funeral procession, one for more than just Teshik or Piett or Palpatine. He felt like they were marching for the death of everything they'd ever known.

There was something about these Mon Calamari warships that disconcerted Captain A'baht. The Dorneans built their ships with utility in mind, which resulted in a gray, bare, functional aesthetic. The Mon Cals, in contrast, seemed to want to mold art and warfare into one coherent package. Every vessel was made of smooth lines, and no two ships were exactly the same. Even the interior bulkheads were gradually curving, their winding hallways painted a bright white that was probably meant to be soothing. To A'baht, the mock-organic forms felt markedly *unnatural*, as though this ship was trying to lull him into a false sense of security.

If Kiles L'toth felt any of the same discomfort, he didn't show it. Though the Dornean's broad, leathery, violet-skinned face was difficult for Mon Cals or even most humans to read, A'baht could tell his friend was quietly pleased with everything- very impressive, considering his personal circumstances.

It had been three days since the victory at Endor and their gunships had finally received full repairs. The final slugfest with Grand Admiral Teshik's ship had been a brutal one,

damaging both their ships and killing members of the crew. L'toth's ship had taken several hits to the command deck, and a piece of shrapnel had neatly sliced off his right leg just above the knee. He walked with an uncomfortable limp now, his body still adjusting to the second-rate prosthetics the Alliance had scrounged up after the destruction of their medical frigate. Once A'baht and L'toth returned to Dornea, a better replacement, designed for Dornean physiology, could be fitted. As for the gunships themselves, Admiral Ackbar had graciously prioritized the repairs to their ships. Now it was time to pay thanks in person.

Their Mon Cal escort led them to a briefing room. Ackbar sat at the far end of a white oval table. Next to him was Firmus Nantz. When the Dorneans arrived, both stood and shook hands with the arrivals. Pleasantries were mercifully short. After a few inquiries about L'toth's leg, which he warmly waved away, all four took seats at the table.

Ackbar took the lead in the conversation by saying, "I want to congratulate you both for your help in bringing in Grand Admiral Teshik. Your people's first contribution to the Alliance cause won't be forgotten. I also hope it won't be the last."

He was wasting no time in taking the conversation where it had to go. A'baht folded his hands on the tabletop and said, "Thank you, Admiral. I'll be sure to relay your words to the Dornean government. We'd like to be heading back to home territory very soon."

Without missing a beat, Ackbar said, "Of course, Captain. I hope you give a favorable report to your government. Let them know that we are always open to speak with them if they desire."

"Of course. I'm sure you're eager to build on your victory and expand the Alliance. However, Admiral, I don't believe my government will be willing to wholly sign on to your coalition at this time."

"I was expecting something of that nature," Ackbar admitted. It was hard to tell, but he sounded disappointed.

“That doesn’t preclude further collaboration between our navies,” L’toth offered. “Particularly if you’re involved in operations in our region of the galaxy. Coordinated exercises may be a bridge that binds our people together.”

A’baht knew wishful thinking when he heard it. Dornea had not been part of the Old Republic and its people had no particular reason to long for a new one. A’baht understood their reasoning, and unlike L’toth, he found things to agree with. The Dornean government would invariably surrender most of its autonomy and liberties if it agreed to become one small part of an ever-greater Alliance horde.

He didn’t want to contradict his friend, but thankfully, Firmus Nantz did it for him. The old human leaned forward and said, “I’m sorry, but the idea sounds suspect to me. Even a few days ago I agreed with Admiral Ackbar that we needed all the help we can get. Things are different now. Palpatine is dead and so are many of his top officers. Pestage is trying to form a coherent government on Coruscant but we already have reports of admirals breaking away and fortifying their own territories for independent rule. The Empire is starting to fracture after only three days. We need to do the opposite and centralize. It’s the only way we’ll assert authority in the Empire’s stead.”

“You’d replace it then?” A’baht asked stiffly.

“Yes, I would. That’s been our goal from the start.” Nantz stabbed a finger on the tabletop. A’baht glanced at Ackbar, wondering if the Mon Cal would interject, but the human went on. “This is a critical juncture. If we don’t act as a unified government and military, our movement could start to break apart too. Different local organizations would start fortifying *their* territory, just like the Imperial admirals are. We didn’t kill Palpatine just so the galaxy could break into a hundred squabbling smaller fiefdoms. We want one central government keeping order, a *better* kind of order than what Palpatine made.”

“You want Coruscant,” L’toth said.

“Exactly. Every legitimate government has been based there. The next step of the war is to consolidate territory and thrust our fleets to the core.”

A’baht glanced at Ackbar. “Have you developed a strategic plan already?”

“One is in progress,” Ackbar said, and it was clear he wasn’t going to say more, not to two officers who weren’t even Alliance members.

A’baht leaned back in his chair. “I understand your concerns, Admiral Nantz. I honestly do. I’ll relay those to our government as well, if you don’t mind.”

Nantz nodded firmly. They both knew that his short speech would only solidify the Dornean government’s stance on independence.

“Maybe things will change one day,” L’toth allowed. “After you seize Coruscant, for example.”

Not *if*, but *after*. Nantz seemed to like the sound of that. A little smile wrinkled his face. “For what it’s worth, Captain, I understand a lot of local governments are going to have the same concerns yours do. We’re looking into a policy of devolved control where sector fleets are under the authority of local governments, at least for matters of regional defense.”

It sounded like a good start. Like some in his government. A’baht was wary that the Alliance might try to assert itself as strongly as the Empire, gobbling up any little world that refused to recognize its authority.

“By the way,” L’toth asked, “I understand you dispatched a carrier to Bakura recently. Was there an issue?”

A look passed between Nantz and Ackbar, and it seemed they weren’t going to get the full story there either.

But to A’baht’s surprise, Ackbar said, “Our task force is currently assisting the local Imperial government at Bakura defend against an invading fleet from the Unknown Regions.”

He didn’t know which was more surprising, the alien invasion or the truce with Imperials. Of course, Bakura was

as far-flung from Coruscant as could be, and with the Imperial navy in disarray, their government might be desperate for any help they can get.

"I hope your alliance is long-lasting and fruitful," L'toth said.

"So do we," Ackbar nodded.

A'baht cleared his throat and said, "There is one other issue I'd like to ask about."

"Name it." Ackbar blinked those big bulbous eyes.

"What's to become of Grand Admiral Teshik?"

Ackbar and Nantz exchanged looks again. A'baht pressed, "I lost five crewmen during the fight with Teshik. Kiles lost eighteen, not to mention his leg. I'd like to tell their families what they died for."

Ackbar closed his eyes, opened them again. "Very well. We've spent the past three days conducting thorough questioning of the grand admiral. His cyborg physiology makes even... extreme interrogation methods difficult, but we have gained some information that may be useful."

"He seems quite eager to explain the weaknesses of his fellow grand admirals," Nantz said. "It seems like there's not much love between members in that club."

That sounded good to A'baht. Killing or capturing the grand admirals would go a long way to asserting the Alliance's symbolic authority regardless of what new territory they took.

"What's happens to Teshik himself?" L'toth asked.

When Ackbar didn't respond, Nantz said, "It's been agreed that he should be executed."

It wasn't surprising. After killing so many prize Imperials in battle, the Alliance needed to show off its judicial capacities by administering harsh punishment to someone, presumably after a publicized and more-or-less fair trial.

Nantz reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a small data-cylinder. He rolled it between long bony fingers and said, "We have portions of his interrogation saved. Would you like to see them?"

A'baht blinked in surprise. L'toth said, "Yes, please."

Nantz leaned forward and slid the data-rod into the holoprojector installed at the center of the table. He dimmed the lights and an image, three-quarters life-sized, appeared in the middle of the room.

It showed a captured Grand Admiral Osvald Teshik, still in his regal white-and-gold uniform, facing a bland-faced Alliance interrogator from across a flat table-top.

The holo was more vivid than most. A'baht could clearly see the paleness of Teshik's skin, the red tint to his hair and beard, the cold dark-metal gleam of his cybernetic emplacements and the dim red glow of his mechanical eye. That half-human countenance should have been disturbing, but from the weariness in Teshik's posture, the slack edges of his mouth, he could tell he was looking at a being resigned to his fate of execution.

In a curious voice, half-natural and half-mechanical, the man was saying tiredly, "Go ahead, Rebel- let's get it over with. Turn Grand Admiral Teshik to smoke. But remember what I said. You'll be smoke, too, soon enough. For each of your wars is just a little piece of a greater war, one endless and incalculably larger. And your rebellion's part in that war didn't conclude with your victory at Endor. In fact, it's barely begun."

The stone-faced interrogator didn't seem impressed. "None of us believe we've accomplished total victory at Endor. We know that putting the galaxy back together and healing the damage your people have done will require many years."

"You don't understand what you've unleashed," Teshik insisted. "You think you can just ride into Imperial Center, kick out Pestage or whoever's on the throne, magically bring back the Senate and call it a day. Ruling a galaxy full of criminals and aliens is so much harder than that. You don't understand how Palpatine took singular control of everything. You don't understand his genius."

"Genius or not, he's dead. We killed him."

“Genius made Palpatine arrogant. That was what killed him, his own ego.”

“And you, Grand Admiral? What, over all else, do you think landed you here?”

Teshik looked down at the table. His face creased in thought. Eventually he said, “For a moment there, after the Death Star exploded, I could have run like Makati and Takel.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Where was there to run to?” Teshik looked up at his interrogator. “I don’t want to be a petty warlord fighting my former comrades over scraps. I’d rather die an Imperial, fighting rebels.” He paused, thought, and added, “My death wasn’t worth nothing either. There are thousands of Imperials who escaped Endor because of me. They’ll fight on for years, decades if they have to.”

“I thought you said they’d all turn around a fight each other?”

“Some will. Most of my fellow grand admirals, I’m sure. But there are also men, good men who are loyal to this Empire, who know your kind unleash chaos on the galaxy with all your good intentions. Those men who escaped because of me, they’ll hound you. The Empire will live on in some way, even without an Emperor.”

He sounded satisfied then, almost smug. Teshik leaned back in his chair and said, “Like I told you, your battle’s just begun.”

PART III: MEGADOR

37 YEARS ABY

It hung like a pale gray sword over the last planet in the Anaxes System. The super star destroyer *Megador*, sole survivor of the *Vengeance*-class design, stretched out nineteen kilometers. Its thin, narrow body bristled with weapons angled to fire and TIE fighters flew in tight formations up and down its length.

It was impossible to be so close to such a monster and not feel a bit of fear.

Intellectually, Etahn A'baht knew that *Megador* posed no threat. With Grand Admiral Pellaeon at its helm, the super star destroyer, largest in the Imperial Navy, was the centerpiece of the joint war games currently being held on the outer edge of the Core worlds' garrison system.

A'baht had been a soldier long enough to know that war games could sometimes prove fatal- for a moment, his mind flashed back to the Fifth Fleet's first mock deployment over Bessimir, all those years ago- but there was no malevolence here today. Indeed, what he saw now would have been impossible earlier in his career: Imperial super star destroyers, Mon Cal dreadnaughts, Dornean gunships, Bothan assault cruisers, Hapan Battle Dragons, Corellian carriers, and more, all training to fight side-by-side.

Still, as he stood on the deck of the old Dornean battleship *Charnak* and looked down on *Megador*'s port shoulder, he couldn't put away his old instinctive dread of such behemoths. The New Republic had scrapped up a few of its

own- *Lusankya*, lost at Borleias against the Yuuzhan Vong, and *Guardian*, now on the opposite side of the planet's orbital ring- but even when fighting alongside those ships, A'baht had never been able to overcome his feelings on first sight of *Executor* at Endor.

Because he was only there today as an observer, there wasn't that much for him to do. Command of *Charnak* and the two gunships that the Dornean Navy had loaned for these exercises fell to Been L'toth. Still relatively young by Dornean standards, Kiles' son had grown to be an accomplished commander in his own right, having fought against the Empire and the Yuuzhan Vong both. A'baht had never mated or sired offspring of his own, but he felt a certain paternal pride as he watched Been L'toth give commands to all the sections of *Charnak's* bridge crew.

The Dornean ships sat off one of *Megador's* shoulders, while a complement of Bothan ships sat off the other. On orders from Pellaeon, the ships pushed power to their engines and began to accelerate their orbit around the planet. Ahead of them, a group of Corellian ships were in motion. Acting as a vanguard fleet, the Corellians would crest the planet's ecliptic first and begin the mock-attack on the ships on *Guardian* and the other side of the planet.

A'baht didn't know whether this battle plan had been drawn up before or after the little show Thrackan Sal-Solo had put on at A'baht's funeral. Either way, the Corellians had been given a starring role in the fight. They disgorged a group of fighters that lanced ahead. TIE interceptors from the two Imperial destroyers off *Megador's* bow and A-wings from the Bothan ships jumped up to join them.

The starfighters cut around the curve of the planet's orbit, out of A'baht's line of sight, but only for a few minutes. Soon the capital ships, too, broke over the curve of the planet and dropped within visual range of the opposing fleet.

"Tell all fighters to deploy in a defensive screen," L'toth was saying behind him. "Have the gunships drop low to protect *Megador's* bridge."

His crew gave curt affirmatives. Unlike the exposed command towers of most Imperial destroyers, *Megador's* bridge was set low against the hull, as it was on *Charnak* or a *Nebula*-class destroyer. It was still a prime target, but the Dornean gunships would do a good job deflecting starfighter attacks while the Empire's two destroyers pushed forward and engaged *Guardian's* defenders.

Up ahead, the Corellian ships and the interceptors were preparing to meet the vanguard from *Guardian's* fleet. For the moment, there was nothing for *Charnak's* crew to do, so L'toth stepped up lightly beside his former commanding officer and said, "Different from the old days, isn't it, sir?"

"Very different," A'baht grunted. He'd protected *Lusankya* and *Guardian* in engagement against the Empire, decades ago, but it felt different defending *Megador*. Not only was it Imperial in design, but her crew and commander were Imperial as well.

It seemed like peace made even stranger bedfellows than war sometimes.

With their bare eyes, the Dorneans could see the Corellian fighters and their allies engage their opposites midways between the two closing fleets. Instead of using live fire, all ships in this exercise had synchronized their targeting systems so that whenever a mock-shot was fired, a mock-hit would register like the real thing on the ship's systems. If a pilot was nailed with a kill shot, his computer would automatically start pulling him out of the fighting zone. If a capital ship took enough invisible fire to collapse its invisible shields, systems corresponding with the damaged zones would start shutting down.

To the gunners working in the crew pits of destroyers, seeing it all through their computer screens, nothing would be different, but for the starfighter pilots it must have felt very strange to dance and duel without the flash of lasers and explosion of torpedoes.

"Almost creepy, isn't it?" L'toth muttered.

It really was. They could see the flaring engine-glow of so many ships all swirling about, but no explosions or lancing plasma.

"It must be disarming for them," A'baht agreed.

"Fighter pilots do duels like these all the time."

"Yes, but they never do them on this scale."

"Grand Admiral Pellaeon is ambitious, isn't he?"

"He's smart. He wants the Galactic Alliance to be an *Alliance*, not just the former Republic systems calling the shots for everyone else."

"Strange position for an Imperial, isn't it?"

"It's the exact position an Imperial would take. Or a Hapan, or any other newcomer to this... coalition."

"An outsider, you mean. Someone who didn't come up through the New Republic Navy."

"Exactly."

L'toth allowed a little smile. "Like you, then."

A'baht snorted. The New Republic had enlisted him in the end, putting him in charge of their newly-made Fifth Fleet. When the political mess of senior command became too much, he'd resigned his commission and gone back to Dornea to defend his world from the Yuuzhan Vong.

"I wouldn't want Pellaeon's job," he said.

"I know. My father says you've always hated politics. But thank you for coming anyway."

"I admit I'm... curious to see how this would work out. But I'm only here as an observer, nothing else."

"I know. Thank you, also, for not stepping on my toes."

"I'd never do that. Even if I didn't respect you, Been, I'd respect your command."

There was a flash of light in the distance. It was far, far away and it died very fast, but it was unmistakable in this strangely peaceful fight.

"Tactical, report," L'toth said. "What happened out there?"

An officer reported, "One of, ah, *our* TIE Interceptors collided with an A-wing, sir. From the Bothan fleet."

“Ejections?”

The officer checked her scanners, then shook her head.

“And there are some things that never change,” Etahn A’baht said.

The first time Cha Niathal had seen a super star destroyer, her mouth had dropped wide in awe. Her shuttle had flown right up into its cavernous landing bay and she’d been marched right up to *Lusankya*’s crew pit to man its guns.

That was all a very long time ago. *Lusankya*, the first super star destroyer captured by the New Republic, was gone and Niathal had been reassigned off that ship much earlier, after the defeat of Orinda but before the victory at Celanon. Still, it felt surprisingly natural to be standing on the bridge of one again, not as a grunt ensign but as commander of the whole magnificent behemoth.

Guardian herself was not Niathal’s primary command. Indeed, the ship was operating on a skeleton crew with greatly reduced weapon batteries, and if Pellaeon really wanted to engage her in a live-fire slugfest, there was no doubt *Megador* would win the brawl. Imperials being Imperials, they kept their big ships battle-ready even in peacetime. The Alliance being the Alliance, they’d stripped *Guardian* of most of her armaments and tacked them onto smaller ships, like Admiral Bwa’tu’s *Nebula*-class destroyer *Welmo Darb*.

For an exercise like this, though, *Guardian* didn’t need full-armed weapons. She simply needed to sit there and be a tempting target.

As expected, Pellaeon had sent the Corellian division ahead first. Niathal, for her part, was letting Admiral Bwa’tu’s complement of Alliance vessels spearhead the defense. She kept *Guardian* back and ordered helm to turn their port side to face the incoming fleet, as though to fire off a set of broadside. Doing that in the planet’s orbit strained their engines a bit, but *Guardian* was still capable on that front at least.

Hanging back with *Guardian* were Admiral Baas's Hapan forces. A pair of double-disc Battle Dragons and a set sleek of Nov cruisers began a slow approach toward *Megador*, putting themselves in between the super star destroyer and Bwa'tu's fleet as a secondary line of defense.

"Admiral," reported *Guardian*'s temporary captain, a younger Mon Cal named Vremarth, "Tactical reports a collision out in the fighter screen. Two pilots lost."

Niathal cursed inwardly. This was supposed to be a bloodless sparring match. Losses were bad for morale and worse for the politics of this awkward alliance.

"Whose were they?" she asked.

"One Imperial, one Bothan."

She heard a little relief in Vremarth's voice, like he was glad none of 'their' pilots had been lost.

Niathal chose to ignore it. "We press ahead with the exercise. That's the procedure."

"Of course, Admiral."

There was no point in calling Pellaeon to make sure; he'd made quite clear that he didn't want to coddle the soldiers. A lot of those mock-fighting here today were young and had never seen real combat. This loss was a tragedy, but as soldiers they had to get used to tragedies, whether they served the Empire, Hapes, Bothawui, or anyone else.

It was something all of them in the Alliance had in common.

Niathal watched, sometimes through the viewport but mostly through the tactical holo, as some of Pellaeon's fighters broke through Bwa'tu's starfighter grid and stabbed toward his capital ships. *Welmo Darb* and its supporting carrier, *Corusca Gem*, pumped out two bellies-full of starfighters that tried to hold back the opposing interceptors, but the TIEs and A-wings managed to land mock-torpedoes on the capital ships' hulls.

"They cut in fast, don't they?" Vremarth remarked.

"Tell Admiral Baas to spread her ships out. Cast a wide net and launch fighters to intercept."

“Yes, sir.”

“And tell Bwa’tu to stop chasing the fighters and engage those Corellian ships.”

“Right away.”

Niathal tried to hide her impatience as the battle played out. The initial plan set out by Pellaeon was that his forces, spearhead by *Megador*, would perform an offensive role while Niathal’s would primarily focus on defending *Guardian*. It was a good enough way to train his people in offense and hers in defense, but battles weren’t always split into easy roles of attackers and defenders. Pellaeon himself had taught that lesson to her and every other New Republic soldier fighting at Orinda, twenty-five years back.

She hoped the grand admiral would appreciate what she was about to do.

Once Bwa’tu was battling the Corellians and the starfighter attack had been repelled by the Hapans, Niathal went over to Vremarth and said, “It’s time to change tactics, captain. Pull *Guardian* out of defensive mode and point our nose at the enemy.”

Vremarth’s big eyes blinked in surprise, but he didn’t question orders. “Should we tell the Hapans to advance?”

Smart man, Vremarth. “That’s right. Tell Baas to put her ships in an offensive formation but hold back on charging until I give the order.”

“And Bwa’tu?”

She glanced at the tactical holo. The admiral was doing a fine job stopping the Corellian advance, but he was going to have to tackle with Pellaeon’s two *Imperial*-class destroyers very soon. They were gaining fast, and once they got there, they’d pin him in for *Megador* to finish off.

“We need him where he is now,” she said. “Let him hold the line.”

Niathal was up to something. Pellaeon could see that with his naked eyes. *Guardian*’s dagger was turning to face *Megador*’s sword head-on, and the Hapan ships were

drifting into an offensive formation with the Nova cruisers pulling ahead to protect the Battle Dragons.

The man beside Pellaeon could see it too. "Sir, correct me if I'm wrong, but it seems Niathal is planning to attack."

Pellaeon glanced sidelong at Vitor Reige. Like his mother, the young man was a sharp, creative thinker, able to spot and adapt to unexpected events like, say, Niathal breaking away from the exercise plan and throwing a surprise at them.

In that way, and select others, Vitor reminded Pellaeon of his son. Mynar Devis was gone now, but Vitor remained. A part of Pellaeon suspected that Reige was, in fact, his biological son too, but he'd never made sure. The joy of gaining Mynar and the pain of losing him during the Yuuzhan Vong War was something he didn't want to experience again, something a man of nearly ninety shouldn't have to endure.

So instead, Vitor Reige was his admirer and disciple, as good as they came. He didn't flatter himself to think that he was to Reige what Grand Admiral Thrawn had been to him: an inspiration, a revelation, an aspiration that could never be reached. He was simply glad to have the man at his side and in his life. It was one of the few deep pleasures he allowed himself after so many decades of fighting.

"Niathal is a rather ambitious fish, isn't she?" Pellaeon said, half under his breath.

Reige glanced at the holo again. "Bwa'tu still seems to be holding a defensive position against the Corellians."

"Niathal hopes we won't spot what she's doing and send our two destroyers forward to tangle with Bwa'tu while she and the Hapans jump forward and attack us." It was a bold move, very unexpected. Pellaeon found himself admiring her for adding a little excitement to his day.

"It's a little hard to miss *Guardian* making a turn-around," Reige pointed out.

"Quite so. She's probably waiting for me to comm her and ask why she'd deviating from the battle plan."

"Are you going to, sir?"

“Rules of the exercise are that there’s no communication between sides while the battle’s on.”

“This is rather different, isn’t it? *She’s* certainly not playing by the rules.”

“No, she’s playing like she wants to win, and so will we. Captain, call *Vindicator* and *Relentless*. Tell them to fall back to meet the Bothans.”

“Corellians won’t like that, sir.”

“We need them to keep Bwa’tu at bay. Reel back those star destroyers.”

“Yes, sir.”

Reige went off to relay orders. There was a chance the Corellians, always feisty, might do something even more half-cocked than what Niathal was doing, but he trusted the captains on *Vindicator* and *Relentless*. The former was commanded by Sol Vernetet, the son of Mynar Vernetet, a friend and one of the first and worst personal losses he’d sustained. Pellaeon had done his best to watch over the captain’s long career, though he’d never become a protege in the way Molgarin Reige’s son had.

Relentless, too, carried a legacy. Captain Vana Dorja commanded a newer vessel than the Aren Dorja had, but she’d chosen to name it after his ship all the same. Whereas personal ambition had sometimes made the father unreliable, the daughter was one of Pellaeon’s most loyal officers. Loyalty was the prime reason he’d brought Reige, Vernetet, and Dorja to the Core with him; that, and a flexibility of thinking that allowed them to train side-by-side against the Empire’s former enemies. Would that everyone back in Imperial space was so adaptable.

He glanced at the tactical holo and saw the Dornean ships still holding position. That old cruiser *Charnak* had cost him greatly once, and it was still strange having to put his faith in it. Some instincts were hard to break, and he was sure A’baht and L’toth were quietly marveling at the same twist of fate, but they were also veteran soldiers and they, too, could be counted on to follow his orders.

And to his pleasant surprise, the Corellians kept tangling with Bwa'tu, even as he started dealing enough simulated damage to force them to retreat out of the battle zone.

Niathal and the Hapans, meanwhile, were already on the move. Their ships cut across the planet's low orbit and cut a straight, short line toward *Megador's* flank. Pellaeon ordered them to turn the destroyer's long starboard toward the enemy to better deal and absorb attacks.

Megador, like *Guardian* herself, still hung back at the edge of the engagement as *Relentless*, *Vindicator*, and the Bothan Assault Cruisers pushed forward to engage the Hapans. *Megador* let fly the rest of her fighter screen and the Dorneans held back to help protect *Megador's* command deck from any stray opposing starfighters that might try to land a lucky kill, the kind that had felled mighty *Executor* all those years ago.

At first, the clashing fleets seemed equally matched, but Pellaeon knew that it wouldn't last forever. Most of the Corellian ships had retreated to the sidelines and Bwa'tu would soon bring his forces to join the battle in low orbit or even strike directly at *Megador* herself. Either way, it was sure to tip the balance of the fight.

That meant Pellaeon had to get creative. He glanced at the tactical display, first at the holo-markers denoting *Vindicator* and *Relentless*, then the Dornean ships still hanging close to *Megador*.

"Captain Reige," he said, "Call our two good captains. Tell Venedet and Dorja to remove themselves from the fight and fall back to sector six-oh-gee."

Reige frowned. "There's nothing there, sir. It's out of the bounds of the fight entirely."

"Exactly."

Reige was a smart man; recognition lit in his eyes. He allowed a little smile. "Very clever, sir. Do you think Niathal will figure it out?"

"We'll see. In the meantime, send the Dorneans to help the Bothans."

“All of them, sir?”

“All their ships.”

“Very good, sir.”

As Reige went off to relay orders, Pellaeon wondered if L'toth and A'baht would realize what he was doing. They were, after all, the ones who'd given him current his burst of inspiration. It had just taken him a quarter of a century to receive it.

There was nothing wrong with losing fights as long as you learned from them.

As *Charnak* moved into the fireless firefight, A'baht tried to figure out what Pellaeon was doing. The two star destroyers had fallen back to the edge of the battle zone, having taken more damage than A'baht had noticed. In sending the Dorneans to engage the Hapans, he'd left *Megador* open for a direct strike from *Guardian* or Bwa'tu.

“I have to admit,” L'toth muttered in between directing strikes, “This is a little more exciting than I'd expected for war games.”

A'baht grunted agreement. He hadn't been expecting Niathal to pull her stunt; neither had Pellaeon and probably not even Bwa'tu. Partially because of that surprise, she stood a good chance of turning a defensive operation into a full victory. No more pilots or crew had been killed since the early accidental collision, though this military drill had gotten as confused as a real fight. A'baht even found himself getting back some of the old anxious will to win he'd had during real combat, all those years ago.

The one good thing was that, in joining the Bothans, the Dorneans tipped the balance of the brawl against the Hapans. *Charnak* and her gunships were able to gang up on one of the two Battle Dragons, forcing the double-disced capital ship to pull out of the fight. The Bothan cruisers kept on tangling with the similarly-sized Nova cruisers, which meant it was up to the Dorneans to tackle the other Battle Dragon.

“Sir,” *Charnak*’s tactical officer reported as they moved on the new target, “The last Corellian ships are out of the fight. Bwa’tu is moving his fleet.”

A’baht almost opened his mouth to ask where to, but L’toth did it instead. The heat of battle, mock or no, really was getting to him.

The officer glanced at the holo. “He appears to be moving toward *us*, sir.”

L’toth didn’t show a hint of stress. “Very well. Get me a line with Admiral Babo. We need to coordinate our defense.”

And just like that, Been L’toth marched off to the communications station and began adjusting the battle plan. He looked so much like his father then it was uncanny.

A’baht was no commander, not any more, so instead of joining L’toth at the comm station, peering over his shoulder and whispering advice to his old protégé, he simply turned his attention to the forward viewport, where he could very clearly see *Guardian* adjusting course for a direct engagement with *Megador*.

There was ego in it, simple as that. Niathal was willing to admit that. The last time she had faced Gilad Pellaeon in combat had been all the way back at Orinda. Two super star destroyers had clashed then, too, and Pellaeon’s canny surprises had turned a New Republic strike into a desperate fighting retreat. As a young ensign, Niathal had been shocked and shamed by Orinda, but it had also given her a sharp respect for Pellaeon. Like a lot of Republic soldiers she’d been told the Imps were arrogant and relied on brute force instead of careful tactics to win their fights.

There was nothing wrong with losing fights so long as you learned from them. And there was nothing wrong with turning the tricks you’d learned against the one who’d taught them.

Guardian slid past the brawling Hapans, Bothans, and Dorneans and cut a straight attack at *Megador*. The other

super star destroyer didn't break its nose away. The two behemoths adjusted course only slightly so that they slid slowly past one another, broadside facing broadside.

At Orinda, the space between *Lusankya* and Pellaeon's *Reaper* had turned into a gigantic, nineteen-kilometer wash of flame and plasma. Now the space between *Megador* and *Guardian* was strangely empty, but that emptiness belied the targeting signals bouncing back and forth between vessels. *Guardian* may have been stripped of most of her real guns, but for the purpose of this exercise she was as well-armed as she'd been at her peak, and her gunnery computers sent out a chorus of signals marking the targets on *Megador* they were mock-firing at.

Megador might have been as long as *Guardian*, but she was a slimmer, smaller vessel overall, and not as well armed. In a real fight Pellaeon would have won, but today, the advantage in this elaborate fictive brawl was Niathal's.

She felt a giddy sense of triumph. It felt like a victory, a retribution, dreamed of for a quarter century was finally within her grasp.

Then Captain Vremarth said, "Admiral, those two star destroyers! They're *attacking!*"

Niathal spun on him. "They pulled out of the fight!"

"I don't understand it myself, Admiral, but they *are* coming at us. I think--"

She waved a hand, shutting him up. Realization came instantly. They'd pulled out fast, sooner than Niathal had expected. She'd found it strange, but there'd been enough to worry about that she hadn't given it much thought.

Pellaeon still had tricks of his own after all.

It was intensely satisfying to see *Vindicator* and *Relentless* fall on *Guardian*'s opposite flank. While no real fire was exchanged, Pellaeon could practically visualize the plasma raining down on the super star destroyer's bridge section. Vernet and Dorja concentrated all their fire there, and within minutes the tactical computer reported *Guardian* as

having taken enough simulated damage to have broken through the aft shields and vaporized the command tower.

It was the most exciting fight Pellaeon had had in years, and it hadn't even cost lives. Still, he had to keep the smug smile off his face as he answered *Guardian's* hail.

"You fought well, Grand Admiral," Niathal said. He had a hard time reading Mon Cal faces but he thought he could hear the dejection in her voice.

"You gave me quite a surprise," Pellaeon said.

"I realize that I broke the plan for this exercise. I'm willing to accept reprimand if you so decide."

Pellaeon waved a hand. "There was no harm done. Frankly, you taught an important lesson today. Expect the unexpected. Even when doing battle drills. It was one I'd almost forgotten myself."

"Thank you, sir. Of course, I can't say I'm totally pleased with the outcome."

"I'd expect not. Nonetheless, it was a good match. You're to be commended for your ingenuity."

Niathal blinked, like she was taken aback by so many compliments. "Thank you, Grand Admiral. Is there anything else?"

"No, I think that's sufficient for now."

"All right." She blinked again. "I'll recall my ships and will report back once everyone is accounted for."

"Please do."

The holo winked out. Pellaeon let loose a long breath. He glanced sideways to see Vitor Reige watching him with a lingering expression of mild confusion.

"That," the captain said, "Was not what I expected from today."

"If the rebels are good for one thing, it's keeping us on our toes." Pellaeon smiled beneath his mustache. "But Niathal is right. We have a lot of cleaning-up to do. Call all fighters back. Relay my personal thanks to Vernetet and Dorja."

"Of course, sir."

“Relay my personal thanks to *Charnak* was well. To L'toth and *especially* to A'baht.”

Reige tilted his head slightly, confused. He hadn't been at Celanon. He wouldn't understand. But he carried out his orders anyway.

Pellaeon didn't know what A'baht would make of that missive. He didn't know if the old Dornean had seen what he was doing or even anticipated it.

If he didn't get it now, well, he would eventually.

The news, predictably, was still about Thrackan Sal-Solo. After making a big commotion with his speech at Bel Iblis' funeral, the man had gone back dirtside and announced that his department had decided to build an orbital defense platform named in honor of the late Corellian general. Denying him funds for that kind of request, right after Bel Iblis' death, would have been political suicide, so Prime Minster Saxan had had no choice but to disburse the money from the Five Worlds' central coffers.

“I'll give him one thing,” Tycho admitted as he sat in the Antilles' family's living room, watching the afternoon holo-broadcast, “That man has a skill a grabbing people's attention.”

“I just feel bad for Bel Iblis. If he had a grave he'd be spinning in it right now,” Iella said from the opposite sofa. She was sitting next to her husband and had arms crossed over his chest.

“In a way, he was a check on a lot of this,” Tycho sighed. “When Bel Iblis was around nobody could deny that Corellia had intrinsic ties to the Alliance.”

“Sal-Solo and his Human League buddies did,” Wedge reminded him. “Remember that whole Centerpoint crisis?”

“Okay, yes, but Bel Iblis kept the crazies in check *most* of the time.”

“Corellia's always had its share of crazies,” Wedge shrugged. “But I admit, Sal-Solo's been getting better and bringing them out.”

“Well, at least Saxan’s reasonable.

“Saxan is still a patriot. She’s reasonable, but she’s Corellian first, Alliance second.”

“Better her than Sal-Solo.”

“Oh, absolutely.”

“What about that Teppler guy? What do you think about him?”

“You know what?” Iella said, “I have a better idea. Let’s *not* watch the news and *not* talk about politics.”

“Sounds lovely,” Wedge said, and promptly turned off the holo.

Tycho stretched his arms and looked around the Antilles’ apartment. The family owned a two-level condominium inside a tower in one of Coronet’s City’s upscale neighborhoods. The living room was on the second level and had broad windows looking out on the sunny cityscape.

“You know, I bet your pension gets you a lot farther here than on Coruscant. Mine and Winter’s place is a third this size.”

“You also don’t have two grown-up daughters,” Iella reminded him.

“True enough, but how long are they going to be in here for? They’re, what, twenty-something by now?”

“Myri’s nineteen, Syal’s twenty-one.”

“Ugh.” Tycho felt suddenly deflated.

“Ugh?” Wedge frowned. “What does *that* mean?”

“It means we’re all getting too damned old. I remember when they two messy-haired little brats having food fights.”

“Well, they don’t have *food* fights anymore.”

Tycho thought a moment. “If Syal’s twenty-one, she should be about done with school here. Has she though about the Academy?”

He didn’t have to say which one. Training young pilots was Tycho’s primary business nowadays. Syal’s parents exchanged glances.

Iella said, “We were actually hoping *you* could have a little talk with her.”

“Me? Of course.” Tycho frowned. “What’s the issue? Is she-?”

They heard a door slide open on the level below them, heard shoes on tile. Without getting up from the sofa, Iella called, “Syal? Is that you?”

From the stairwell leading down to the lower level, a voice called up, “It’s me, Mom.”

“Your timing’s great, Syal. Come on up.”

A second later, Syal popped up from the lower level and stepped into the living room. Wedge and Iella’s older daughter was dressed in a simple blouse and trousers and wore her bronze hair in a tight bun. She looked at her parents, then at Tycho. She blinked but said nothing.

“Syal,” her father said, “I think you and Uncle Tycho should take a little walk.”

Five minutes later, they were out on the streets. In this part of Coronet City, apartment towers rose high all around them but the streets were wide and the pavement shaded by ornamental trees. Syal walked quickly, with long anxious strides, and kept staring at the pavement in front of her instead of looking at Tycho.

“I’ve been working on my application to the Academy,” she was saying. “I’ve decided I want to be a fighter pilot, like Dad.”

Tycho wasn’t surprised by that. The girl had inherited her father’s natural talent for flying. “I don’t think you have to be worried about getting in, Syal. I’m sure you can pass the flight test and from what I hear you won’t have any problem with academics either.”

“I know, but that’s not what I’m worried about.”

“What *are* you worried about?” It was clearly something; Syal had always been very serious and focused, unlike her sister, but she was acting more weighted-down than usual.

Still looking down at the pavement, Syal took a breath and said, “I want to enroll in the Academy under a false name.”

She seemed to deflate after she got it out. Tycho didn’t have to think hard to see what she was after. She was the

daughter of the most famous starfighter pilot in the entire galaxy; it was no surprise she wanted a way out of the pressure, the expectation, the assumptions that went with the Antilles name.

"Okay," Tycho said, "That's fine. There's no rule against it. But you should be sure that's what you really want."

"It is," she nodded firmly. "I don't want everyone to think of me as Dad's kid. I just want to be *me*."

"With a fake name."

"Okay, with a fake name" she admitted, "And maybe I'll tell people who I really am, if I trust them, but I don't want special treatment, Uncle Tycho. Not even from you."

He could see it all on her face: the pride, the determination, the aching need to define herself as herself and not how others saw her. He couldn't help but smile, a little wistful, as he tried to remember what it had been like to be so young.

"No special favors, Syal, I promise. I'll shame and abuse just like I do all the other recruits."

"Good," Syal nodded seriously, then finally looked up at him, "You don't really treat them bad, do you?"

"Only the ones who deserve it," he patted her shoulder. "Now come on, I think your mom said something about a good home-cooked dinner."

When they got back to the Antilles' apartment, a meal was indeed in the process of being cooked. Wedge was, surprisingly, helping out Iella, having picked up basic culinary skills some time during his retirement.

In the end, they sat down at the same table for dinner: all five of them. Wedge's younger daughter was a constant contrast to her sister; whereas Syal was small, neat, and serious, Myri was taller, louder, and more colorful, from her clothes to her short-cut hair dyed bits of red and gold.

"I hear you've been learning some family tricks from your mom," Tycho told her at one point.

"She wants me to learn how to be sneaky like her," Myri said after swallowing a mouthful of nerf stew. "I don't know if it's sticking, Mom."

"There's sneaky and there's sneaky," Iella said. "I think you'd be good at misdirection."

"So the flame-y hair was your idea?" Tycho asked.

Iella made a face.

"Well, I figure I might as well try to learn some tricks from Mom," Myri said. "I don't think I can be a pilot like Syal. I mean, I *can* fly stuff, so I got *some* of dad's genes, but not as much as the big sis."

She jabbed a thumb toward Syal. The older sister grunted in acknowledgement.

Once the meal was done, neither Syal nor Myri seemed to want to linger at the dinner-table long. Syal went down to her room to study, while Myri slipped on a jacket and boots that added five more centimeters to her height and slipped out into the night.

"I'm guessing you weren't like Myri in your youth," Tycho told Iella.

"I wasn't quite as... colorful."

"What about you, Wedge? Were you like Syal?"

"I think I had a little more fun."

Tycho chuckled and pushed his plate away. "I'm going to assume this is what they mean by the joys and surprises of parenthood."

"Something like that."

"Well, it's normal life, Wedge. Real life, the kind real people have when they're not having to save the galaxy every week."

"Was it every week? I feel like I was more like every other month..."

"Well, I'm glad it's been downgraded to every couple years. Pretty soon we'll be down to every few decades..."

"In a few decades neither of us is going to be fit to fly anything, Tycho."

"Right, we'll be in the old folks' home slurping goo through our toothless mouths, mumbling through our gums about the good old days."

"Assuming we still *remember* the good old days..."

“That’s a long time off,” Iella said seriously. “And there’s things that have to happen before that.”

Her tone said she wasn’t in the mood for banter. She had something else in mind.

“What’s up, Iella?” Tycho asked. He glanced at Wedge, whose face had gone serious but didn’t give further hints.

“There’s something you need to pass on to the higher-ups on Coruscant,” Iella leaned forward a little.

“Something like *what?*” He felt something heavy drop into his gut, the kind of heavy he hadn’t felt in years, the kind that never meant anything good.

“I’ve got some tips from an old CorSec friend who wants to stay anonymous,” Iella said “It’s about Thrackan Sal-Solo.”

“Then it’s not anything good.”

“My contact says Sal-Solo’s been on the lookout for ways to improve the Five Worlds’ local military without drawing Alliance attention.”

Sal-Solo made no secret of his desire of an independent Corellia, but Tycho had no idea the man had been taking concrete actions toward buffing up the military. The Alliance had recently laid down strict laws regulating the size of local defense forces.

“Has he been contacting weapons suppliers? Starship manufacturers?”

“According to my contact, it’s nothing so obvious. Sal-Solo’s been trying to track down abandoned hardware.”

Tycho frowned. “You mean abandoned spacecraft?”

“Apparently he’s got a trace on some Imperial warships that went missing in the Deep Core a while back.”

The Empire had pulled out of its Deep Core territories decades ago, but there was no telling what stray secrets were hidden in that labyrinth of tightly-packed stars, nebulae, and black holes. The Emperor’s old redoubt at Ebaq 9 had helped turn the tide against the Yuuzhan Vong, and Admiral Pellaeon had found multiple super star destroyers that he’d thrown against the New Republic.

"The Empire gave us charts to the Deep Core during the Vong War," Tycho reminded her. "We've scouted all the ones we could. What could Sal-Solo have that we don't?"

"They Empire gave us charts they wanted us to see, naturally," Iella shrugged. "We have no reason to believe they were complete."

"But where did Sal-Solo get *his* intel?"

"I don't know. All I can say is that he sent some envoys on a secret mission to the Lyor system. You probably haven't heard of it, but it's on the charts, past the Empress Teta system on the old Byss run."

"Any idea what he found there? Or when these guys went on their secret mission?"

"They set out nine days ago. That's all I know."

Tycho sat back with his arms crossed over his chest. He glanced at Wedge and asked, "Any input?"

"Only that we should find whatever Sal-Solo was after as soon as we can. We've seen these kinds of surprises before. We know what damage they could do."

He didn't have to say more. Even after twenty-five years, Wedge had never really got over the shock and shame of his failure at Orinda.

"I'll do whatever I can to get to the bottom of this," he told them both.

"That's why we told you," Iella said. There was a lot of trust in her eyes, and in Wedge's too.

He just hoped he could live up to it.

As he conducted the post-exercise debriefing aboard *Megador*, Pellaeon felt like he was standing amidst a gallery of ghosts.

No, it wasn't that bad. Echoes, perhaps, was a better word. Sol Vernet was well into his fifties, grey and weathered and now older than his father Mynar had ever been. Vana Dorja had her late father's wide cheekbones and black hair, but her green eyes and long sharp nose spoke of her other parent. As for Vitor Reige, the young captain had a face that

always reminded Pellaeon of his mother, but that didn't bother him as much, because Molgarin Reige, at least, was still alive and serving the Empire.

Pellaeon had worked with them for long enough, trusted them all enough, that he could usually look past the echoes and focus on the three captains in front of him. They sat in a light semicircle around his desk, reciting reports on crew readiness and making quick recommend-dations on how to improve for future exercises.

At one point, Dorja asked, "Admiral, do you plan on holding exercises of this scale again?"

It was the first direct question Pellaeon had received in almost fifteen minutes, and it jerked him out of a slightly lazy stupor.

"Not at this time," he said. "Our brawl over Anaxes made for a good spectacle, but coordinating elements from so many different fleets was difficult. Just arranging a schedule on holding the exercise was hard enough. The Corellians dragged their feet, of course, but the Hapans were prickly too."

Dorja nodded. "I'm glad."

Pellaeon raised a white eyebrow. "Are you now? Why is that, Captain?"

Like her father, the woman knew how to be direct when she wanted to. "Sir, I think there's better way to spend time and resources than arranging massive war games like this."

"Do you now?" Pellaeon leaned forward, elbows on desktop, genuinely interested. "What ways?"

Without blinking, she said, "An engagement of the type we staged over Anaxes would never happen today. Large fleet battles like that haven't happened since the Vong War. We should be training for localized police actions against opponents using higher numbers of smaller warships, probably combined with hit-and-run tactics. Frankly, sir, I think our time would be better spent running war games with other Imperial forces. They need to learn how to fight that way too."

Pellaeon looked at the other captains. "Thoughts, gentlemen?"

Vernedet shook his head. "This coalition is vital."

"I'm not saying we turn our back on it," Dorja said, prickly. "Quite the opposite. I'm saying new Alliance tactics need to be taught in the Empire. Many of our captains are still... traditionalists."

Pellaeon restrained a tight smile. Her father had been one of those traditionalists, as had Vana Dorja herself, at least until the Yuuzhan Vong swept through Imperial space and taught her the need for adaptability, along with a healthy dose of humility.

He looked to Reige. "What about you, Captain? Any desire to go back to Bastion?"

He was asking, of course, whether Vitor wanted to go back and see his mother, still serving as Pellaeon's intelligence chief after all these years. Reige said evenly, "I'll go where I'm sent, of course, but as it's your flagship, I think *Megador* belongs in the Core right now."

It was a good answer, what he'd been expecting. Reige had a creative mind, but he always acted like the consummate professional, loyal to his post. In that way, he was very unlike how Mynar had been.

Pellaeon looked back to Dorja. "I understand the desire for smaller exercises. It's what I planned to schedule anyway. It's still important that we cooperate with the other fleets in the coalition, of course. That's why my next plan is to schedule war games with localized forces. Bothans and Dorneans, for example, or Imperials and Hapans."

"Sparring against each other or combining units?" Vernedet asked.

"A little of both." Pellaeon smiled slightly. "We'll shake things up and make things more fun."

That didn't get a smile out of his captains, but they seemed pleased with the plan nonetheless. Pellaeon dismissed them after that. Vernedet and Dorja headed for the hangar bay, where shuttles waited to take them back to their destroyers.

Reige was slower to leave. As he turned for the door, Pellaeon called on him to wait.

"Can I help you with anything else, sir?" he asked.

"Have you identified the TIE pilot we lost during the exercise?"

"Yes, sir. A Flight Officer Weil Jerven, from Muunilinst."

"An experienced pilot?"

"No, sir. Just four months out of training. He'd never seen any real action."

Pellaeon sighed. He knew these accidents happened, but it was a poor, pointless way for a child to die. "Has his family been notified?"

"Not yet, sir. I understand his squadron leader is still putting together a message to his parents."

Good man, Reige, making sure it was done properly. "Once his letter's finished, have him send it to you before it goes out. I'll be sending you a little something also."

"Sir?"

"Another message for his parents, Captain."

"Ah," Reige said, "I see, sir."

Vitor and his mother were two of the few beings who knew about Pellaeon's relationship with Mynar Deviss. Though neither Pellaeon nor Reige were prone to shows of emotion, the captain knew instantly why the young pilot's death had struck a chord, and why he felt the need to address the young man's parents.

But Reige was an officer and gentlemen, just like Pellaeon had been at that age, so instead of offering some mawkish empathy, he simply said, "Is there anything else, sir?"

"That will be all. Thank you, Captain."

Reige nodded and left the room. Without his young captains there to fill the silence, Pellaeon's office seemed to yawn open around him. After all this time he still wasn't used to *Megador*, just like he'd never gotten used to *Reaper*; he'd have preferred the tighter, more familiar confines of the smaller *Chimaera*, but unfortunately, that home was a long time gone.

He sighed and got out his datapad. He'd written countless letters to anonymous grieving family members, including Sol Vernedet's own mother over fifty years back. It had been very hard then, but along the way he'd gotten used to them. They'd become as routine as any other part of war.

They weren't at war now, and he'd fallen out of the practice. He realized he hadn't done it since the end of the Yuuzhan Vong War, when the recent pain of Mynar's loss had made the writing acutely difficult.

He found it was difficult now, trying to add gravitas and nobility to what was, ultimately, a stupidly fatal accident, but he tried his best. That young man (not anonymous, *Flight Officer Weil Jerven*, he reminded himself) had still pledged himself to defend the Empire. He deserved respect for that alone. So Pellaeon took his time composing the message and made sure he did it right.

For years after the rebel conquest of Imperial Center, the Empire's authorities had moved their base of operations from planet to planet. The base had been called Bastion but the location had changed again and again, too often because of constant rebel encroachments into ever-shrinking Imperial territory.

Once peace with- or surrender to- the rebels had been secured, there'd been no need to keep moving the base around. Bastion had become a specific planet as well as a place, and in the nearly twenty years since the end of hostilities, the it had become a seat of government with all the trappings of one.

Fiery devastation wrought by the Yuuzhan Vong had done great damage to the cities, but rebuilding had been swift. Call it the Empire, call it the Remnant, its government had been determined to build up its capital to respectable splendor, to prove itself respectable to the so-called Alliance that reigned from Coruscant. On that rare thing, Pellaeon and the Moff Council had agreed and cooperated wholeheartedly.

So Bastion had become a capital that looked like a capital. It had grand buildings, broad streets, manicured gardens. It had statues and monuments to past Imperial glories, carefully curated to present a vision of the Empire that was palatable to the rest of the galaxy without betraying the ideals the Empire had stood for: safety, security, justice, and peace. There were statues to slain heroes like Thrawn, Romodi, or Teshik, but none to Palpatine or Vader, and certainly not to petty warlords like Jerec, Harrsk, or Teradoc. Most of them were dedicated not to individuals but to the fighting men and women who had died by the millions to preserve a way of life that prized order, stability, and strength above all else.

And that, all things considered, was as it should be.

Turr Phennir visited the memorial to the pilots of the 181st Fighter Group too often nowadays. It was morbid, he knew, and also a sign of restlessness caused by too many years in retirement. Still, it was a handsome memorial, situated at the end of a long promenade decorated by lush hedges and colorful flowers. A life-sized replica of a TIE Interceptor, carved from obsidian stone and painted with red bloodstripes, rose on a stone pillar and stabbed upward toward the sky. In a semicircle around the stone starfighter was a black stone bowl, engraved with the white-lettered names of every man and woman in the 181st who had died in service of the Empire.

It was a long list, a constant reminder of the brutal attrition that had ground the Galactic Empire down to almost nothing. It included not only the names of pilots who had died in combat as part of the 181st, like Seth Avrian or Seiar Damkin, but those who had served in the unit and died thereafter, such as Mynar Devis, who had rammed his ship into a Yuuzhan Vong interdicator late in the war. It even included General Evir Derricote, who had cared more about bio-engineering weapons than training combat pilots and had let the 181st deteriorate into one of the Empire's worst combat units until one man whipped it into shape.

Derricote's inclusion made all the more conspicuous the absence of the man who had made the 181st what it was: General Baron Soontir Fel.

The man wasn't dead; at least, that was what they said. It had been over thirty years since Turr Phennir had seen his old leader. He still didn't know how to feel about him.

Death would have been a better fate for Fel in some ways, or at least one easier to accept. Instead (so they said), Fel had been captured by the rebels at Brentaal, just six months after Endor. He'd defected, flown with Rogue Squadron, been recaptured by Ysanne Isard, and had finally, somehow, ended up as a commander in Grand Admiral Thrawn's private army in the Unknown Regions.

When his mentor had been captured, Phennir had been racked with guilt. When he'd supposedly defected, Phennir had refused to believe it. When he'd disappeared, Phennir had felt vaguely hopeful that the man he'd admired most might reappear in the Empire's service. His final fate (if the rumors were true) was something Phennir couldn't parse. He was neither patriot nor traitor, hero nor villain.

He wished he could have asked Fel himself what had happened, but that would never be.

While Phennir was pacing around the 181st Memorial on a suitably gray, dreary afternoon, he spotted a woman and child approaching down the promenade. The woman had to have been no older than thirty, the boy no older than ten. Despite the gloomy backdrop there was something picturesque about them. They would have fit perfectly on the cast of one of the old wartime holodramas Phennir had practically been raised on: the beautiful wife and loyal child waiting for daddy to come home from fighting the nasty subhuman rebels.

"Mummy, what's this statue for?" he heard the boy ask.

His mother ruffled his dark hair and said, "This is for the One-Eighty-First. Do you know what they were?"

Are, Phennir thought. They weren't gone yet.

The boy shook his head. "Were they pilots?"

“They were the greatest fighter pilots in the whole Empire.”

“Even better than Rogue Squadron?”

The mother, bless her, didn’t miss a beat. “Much better than Rogue Squadron,” she smiled.

The boy’s eyes went wide. “What are those names, mummy? Are those the pilots who flew in the... the...”

“One-Eighty-First,” she provided. “Those are the pilots who *died*, dear.”

The boy wilted a little. “Oh.”

She ruffled his hair again. “Those are all the brave pilots who died to keep you safe, love. They died to protect you from the Vong and all those other nasty subhumans.”

“It’s sad they died.”

“I know, dear. But the wars are all over. There’s no more fighting.”

“I’m glad.”

“So am I, love.” She kissed him on the forehead. “Now come on, let’s go find you dad.”

The woman and the child tottered off. They hadn’t paid Phennir any attention at all.

The conversation left him feeling strangely dejected. It was, as she’d said, good that the wars were over and the fighting done. They hadn’t added any names to that wall in seven years. Still, something made him feel hollow inside.

Phennir kept walking. Night fell slowly behind a cloudy sky. When it was fully dark, and the city lights all up, Phennir sought out the Old Glory.

Being the capital of a respectable polity, Bastion had a number of fine eating and drinking establishments that welcomed beings from all corners of the galaxy, human and alien alike, so long as they paid. The Old Glory was not one of those. It was humans-only, it was cheap, it was out-of-the-way, and it was a favorite of old soldiers whose glory was long gone.

Phennir felt right at home there. When he entered he was hailed by familiar faces. He bought a drink from the barman,

chatted for five minutes with a gray-bearded major who'd once commanded an AT-AT brigade, then spotted a more familiar face at the far end of the bar. He excused himself and plopping himself down on the stool next to Davit Belkaron.

Belkaron, lucky man, still had a full head of hair, and he wore it as long and messy as always, even though it was shot through with gray by now. When he spotted Phennir his eyes lit up and he said, "Well, nice to see you, boss."

"Likewise." Phennir tapped his glass against the other pilot's. "What have you been up to?"

"Oh, the usual. I got me a job as a private flight instructor. I told you that, right?"

"Last time, yeah." It had been this bar, no more than a month ago. They'd both been drunk and wistful at the time.

"Well, what have you been up to, boss?"

Phennir shrugged uneasily. "Nothing special. I just took a walk today. Stopped by the One-Eighty-First memorial."

Belkaron gave a long sigh. "I try not to. Stop by, I mean. I always end up reading those names and I think... Well, you know."

"Yeah." Phennir tipped back his drink, swallowed. "There was this kid there with his mum. It felt... I dunno."

Belkaron raised an eyebrow. "It felt *what*?"

"Strange. Just strange."

Belkaron grunted and took a sip from his glass.

"The kid, he didn't know the One-Eighty-First," Phennir continued. "He asked if we were as good as Rogue Squadron. The mum, though, she set him straight."

"Good woman."

"Good woman. Pretty, too."

"And you didn't puff up your chest and introduce yourself, General?"

"She was half my bloody age. And had a husband."

"Ah, still honorable, boss, that's you."

Phennir shook his head and took another drink. He didn't dwell on Rogue Squadron as much as he used to, but he

found himself wondering what Antilles or Celchu were doing with their waning years. He wondered how different it felt to look back on a long war of attrition when you were on the winning side.

There was a small clamor at the other end of the bar. People were hunched close to and holo-projector, and even from the opposite side of the room, Phennir could make out the floating gray dagger of an *Executor*-class super star destroyer. His mind flicked back to the behemoths he'd fought with, or against: *Executor*, *Lusankya*, *Reaper*.

Belkaron noticed it too. Together, they crossed over to the other side of the room and joined the crowd. The holo zoomed out to show not just one super star destroyer but another, this one a narrow gray sword. Smaller capital ships moved around them: Hapan, Mon Cal, Bothan, Corellian, designs he didn't even know.

Over the spectators' chatter, Phennir could hear the voice of the announcer, saying, "The war games conducted on the edge of the Anaxes System today were the largest on record and contained ships and personnel from over two dozen Galactic Alliance member systems. The battle pitted the forces of Admiral Cha Niathal on *Guardian* against Grand Admiral Pellaeon on *Megador*."

There were a few claps at the mention of Pellaeon and his flagship, but Phennir felt hollow. *Guardian* should have been theirs too, and all those Bothans and Mon Cals should have been theirs to control. It had all been that way once.

The announcer continued, "Admiral Pellaeon defeated Niathal's forces thanks to a deft surprise attack by the Star Destroyers *Vindicator* and *Relentless*. After pinning down Niathal's flagship, the Grand Admiral forced her to surrender."

"That's our lads!" someone said.

"Told ya he'd do it," added another.

"Show that kriffing fish how it's done!"

Phennir sighed and glanced sideways at Belkaron. The look on his face, sullen and stiff, matched his own. After all

they'd fought, after all their friends had died, it had all come down to stupid play-fighting and hollow victories.

"Barman!" Phennir called. "How 'bout another drink?"

"In *my* day," Etahn A'baht said, "War games were much more serious."

He hadn't meant it as a joke, but Been laughed anyway. They sat having breakfast in the captain's cabin aboard *Charnak*, which was now L'toth's but had once been A'baht's, a very long time ago. The ship was in orbit over Anaxes, undergoing installation of an improved sensor package courtesy of the Alliance.

He continued, "I'm particularly surprised by the maneuver Niathal pulled. Going that far from the initial plan wasn't just bold, it was dangerous. A lot more lives could have been lost."

"But they weren't," L'toth said, "And like you've said again and again, combat situations are always full of surprises and nothing goes according to plan."

"True enough, but her actions were still uncalled for. Niathal should have been disciplined."

"Did you think it was exciting, though?"

He couldn't deny that. Seeing two super star destroyers plunge toward each other was a spectacle he hadn't witnessed in almost a quarter century. "It was exciting because no one was dying. When they *are*, things look very different."

"Well," said L'toth, "It's a good thing we're in peacetime, isn't it?"

"Pray it stays that way."

L'toth took a gulp of water and asked, "Are you worried it might now? Do you see any problems ahead? We've had local disturbances like the Swarm War, but nothing that's mobilized the whole Alliance fleet."

"I don't see obvious fault lines, but that doesn't mean anything. Nobody saw the Yuuzhan Vong coming, or the Yevetha, or the mess with the Killiks."

L'toth studied the older Dornean for a moment, then asked, "Do you regret serving the New Republic?"

"Of course not."

"You can seem down on the Alliance sometimes. I was wondering."

"I don't regret what I did. Someone had to stop the Yevetha and I'm proud to have been a part of it. But we lost a lot of good people there, mostly because the politicians on Coruscant couldn't figure out how they wanted to play it. The Vong invasion was the same, but a thousand times worse. And this big coalition fleet the Alliance is putting together is going to be hampered by the same problems."

"Getting a whole galaxy full of species and systems to work together is never going to be easy."

"Exactly. There's always going to be a conflict somewhere."

"You know, my father fought in a lot of the same campaigns as you, but he's always been more enthusiastic about supporting the Alliance. Or the New Republic."

"Your father is an eternal optimist." It almost sounded like an insult.

L'toth chuckled again. "I'll let him know."

"He does already, I think. He's passed it on to you."

L'toth took another drink and asked, "Did you have anything against Dornea participating in these exercises?"

"No. If we're going to be part of this coalition, we should act like it. Besides, it's important to know our partners."

"And should we be part of it?" L'toth leaned forward a little. He seemed eager for the older Dornean's opinion.

A'baht chose his words carefully. "Given the current state of the galaxy, it doesn't do us any harm. If we *weren't* part of a network that includes everyone from Hapans to Imperials, we'd be consigning ourselves to a hermit state. This isn't just a military coalition, after all, it's a diplomatic and economic one too."

"What if the state of the galaxy becomes something else?"

"Like during the Vong War?"

L'toth nodded. During that conflict, A'baht had grown frustrated with Sienn Sovv and the other senior New Republic commanders, resigned his commission, and gone back to Dornea to defend his home sector just as he had for most of the conflict against the Empire. Dornea's remote location had shielded it from all but a few skirmishes with the invaders.

"Then I recommend we do what we've always done," A'baht said. "Take care of ourselves."

L'toth looked down at his glass. "If you think that, why did you join the New Republic? Why did you command the Fifth Fleet against the Yevetha?"

"Because, given the state of the galaxy, it was the best choice at the time."

L'toth didn't respond; he was deep in thought. At some fifty standard years old, he was still young for a Dornean. He had much to learn.

"If everyone thought like you," he said at last, "There wouldn't be much of an Alliance, would there?"

A'baht wasn't if most of them didn't, deep down. Crises usually showed beings' true colors in a way that peacetime did not. But he felt like appeasing L'toth, so he said, "We should be thankful they don't, then, shouldn't we?"

"I know I am." L'toth tipped his water cup toward A'baht in a muted toast, then drank.

From the office of the Chief of State, you had a wonderful view of Galactic City fresh and gleaming in the pale morning light. Streams of airspeeders ran in steady rush-hour rivers and the lights in the lower levels went out bit by bit as daylight chased away the skyscrapers' long shadows.

Inside the office, too, it felt like a fresh and pleasant morning. The air was thick with the rich smell of caf and the four beings who sat around Cal Omas' desk knew each other well from years of shared professional experience. A newcomer would have mistaken it for a relaxed morning briefing if not for the gravity on the faces of those involved.

"Our scouts in the Lyor System found no ships of any kind," said Belindi Kalenda, the chief of Galactic Alliance intelligence. Weary bags were visible beneath her eyes, even against the dark skin of her face.

"Was your search thorough?" asked Admiral Niathal. Her webbed hands were placed politely on the tabletop but there was an urgency in her voice.

"Very. After we determined there were no ships or life-forms in the system, we started scanning for trace energy residues, plasma exhausts, and anything else to mark that ships had been in the system recently. Our results were... inconclusive."

"Why is that?" asked Tycho Celchu. After bringing Iella Wessiri's news to the proper authorities, he'd insisted he be kept in the loop of the ensuing investigation.

"The Deep Core is a very difficult part of space," Kalenda reminded him. "Even sparse systems like Lyor are full of debris from ancient novas, dead stars, and other phenomena. It's never easy to tell what's naturally occurring and what's from an artificial source."

"In the end, when all was said and done, what did your people find?" asked Chief of State Omas. He sat behind his desk, slumped a little in his chair, but his voice was taut and his eyes alert.

Kalenda held up one finger. "First, we found the remains of the Imperial facility around the fourth moon of Lyor's third planet. It was not only abandoned, but it was blown to rubble. There were no surviving computer systems we could access and no trace of whatever the Imperials once kept there."

"Was it destroyed recently?" asked Niathal.

"Within the past few weeks or months? No. However, our guess is that it was destroyed within the past three years."

That was well beyond the last anyone had heard of Imperial activity in the Deep Core. Before anyone could state the obvious, Kalenda held up another finger. "Secondly, we did find traces of someone else's exhaust

over the facility, faint and scattered, but there. Based on the particle residue and level of dispersion, it almost certainly came from a mid-sized Corellian freighter within the past week.”

Tycho frowned. “So what does that mean? Somebody beat the Corellians to the prize? By two or three *years*?”

“We don’t have enough information to say anything for sure, but it is likely.”

“Is there any chance we can figure out what class of ship they were using?” asked Niathal. “If they went down the Byss Run they probably stopped at the Empress Teta System first. They’re part of the Alliance, so I can order them to give us their local flight logs.”

“The exhaust elements we picked up are common to all Corellian-made ships,” Kalenda said. “It has to do with the fuel injectors CEC engines use. Beyond that, I can give you a very vague size estimate.”

“That doesn’t sound too helpful,” said Tycho.

“It’s a place to start,” Niathal insisted.

Omas slapped his hands on the desktop, commanding attention. He said, “Right now we’ve got two problems in our hands. One we already knew about: Sal-Solo’s looking to gather a secret fleet.”

“I can’t say I’m surprised by that,” Tycho admitted.

“Nor I,” said Niathal, “But after today’s news I’m actually encouraged.”

“Encouraged how?” Kalenda frowned.

“If Sal-Solo is chasing the ghosts of old Imperial warships, that means he doesn’t have the resources to start building ones of his own.”

Tycho hadn’t thought of it that way, but she had a point. “So you’re saying Sal-Solo’s not the immediate concern?”

“The Corellian situation as a whole is going to have to be watched,” Omas said, “Very closely. I don’t need to remind you all that if Sal-Solo’s trying to dig up old toys, he’s got Centerpoint right in his backyard waiting to be played with.”

"My people haven't seen any signs that Sal-Solo's been investigating use of Centerpoint Station," Kalenda said, "But I promise I'll put extra resources on the Corellian issue."

"Good enough for now," Omas nodded. As a junior agent, Kalenda had been on the ground at Corellia during the Centerpoint Crisis twenty years ago, and Omas trusted her to know the system well "That leaves the second problem, and right now that one worries me more. We need to know what happened at Lyor."

"It sounds like the trail's gone cold," Tycho said.

"Very," Kalenda nodded. "We've checked all our records for information on Lyor, from old NRI reports to the charts of the Deep Core the Remnant gave us during the Vong War. Nothing mentions an Imperial base in the system."

"How large a base was this, based on the wreckage?" Niathal asked.

"Not especially. It looked like a research building on the ground, plus a station in orbit, but the station was shot out of space and crashed in pieces on the surface, which itself is just airless rock."

Tycho gave a small sigh. It was sitting there in front of them all, waiting to be asked, and since nobody else seemed like the were going to do it, Tycho said, "This would be a lot easier if Admiral Pellaeon was in on this conversation. Why isn't he?"

There was an awkward pause. Niathal looked away and Kalenda shifted her eyes onto Omas' desk. The Chief of State took a breath and said, "That was my decision."

"Why?" Tycho repeated.

"We're talking about lost Imperial warships. It could be one, it could be a whole fleet--"

"The station wasn't big enough to host a fleet," Kalenda interjected.

"It doesn't matter." Omas waved a hand. "The point is, this is very critical, potentially very explosive information. I want to keep it in as tight a circle as possible right now."

"Pellaeon is exactly the person who could help us," Tycho insisted. "We've already run into a dead end."

"I want to keep it with people I trust absolutely."

Tycho's mind flashed to another conversation with Omas, two years back, when he'd sung a very different tune. "If you don't trust Pellaeon, why did you appoint him Supreme Commander?"

"I trust Pellaeon to be the best military commander in the galaxy. That's not the same as trusting him with every scrap of top-secret intel."

"I recommended we keep this from the Grand Admiral," Kalenda looked at Tycho. "Pellaeon is loyal to the Alliance military, but at the end of the day he's an Imperial. He knows plenty of the Remnant's secrets just like we have plenty of our own that we don't tell."

"But we could *ask* him about Lyor."

"Even if we trust Pellaeon, what about *his* contacts?" Niathal asked. "If Pellaeon learns we're looking for whatever was at Lyor, others inevitably will too. Members off the Moff Council, maybe. Admiral Reige's intelligence operatives. Hawkish members of the fleet."

"I understand the need to be cautious, but what else are we going to do?" Tycho looked around the table.

No one seemed to have a quick answer for that one. Omas tapped a finger on the desktop and said, "Chief Kalenda, work with Niathal's people to try to identify any Corellian ships going down the Byss Run. If we get very, *very* lucky, we can trace it back to its owner and ask *them* what they were looking for."

"What about me?" Tycho asked.

"I suggest you talk to your contact on Corellia, General." Tycho hadn't told anyone who had given him the information, but Omas was smart enough to assume that an Antilles had been involved. "See if they can't dig up any more hints on this."

"That may get us deeper into Corellia's political mess than we want to be right now."

“I’m prepared to accept that. I don’t want to be surprised by any long-lost Imperial warships lurking around, General Celchu.”

Tycho thought back to the old campaigns against Pellaeon himself and nodded. “Believe me, sir, neither do I.”

In the end, it hadn’t been hard to get the local government on Empress Teta to surrender the past two weeks’ flight logs of every ship passing in and out of their space. Cha Niathal was very glad that some systems were still giving the Galactic Alliance central command the respect it deserved, even if the Corellians did not.

Once she had the data, Niathal turned it over to Kalenda and her intelligence people, while also lending some of her own from fleet intel. It was still hard going; the Empress Teta System had received over three hundred ships in that time window, ranging from tiny starfighters to bulk haulers. The system’s sensor logs registered every ship that passed through its space, including those who actually stopped on the planet and those who passed through.

Niathal and Kalenda agreed that the latter were their primary focus in this instance; the Corellians had probably wanted to attract as little attention as possible and had almost certainly flown their ship under a false identification code. Based on the parameters gathered from scouting the Lyor system, they were able to narrow it down to a dozen Corellian Engineering Corp mid-sized freighters.

Only one of those passed through the system on a vector down the Byss Run.

“A YT-2800B freighter,” Kalenda said as they sat in Niathal’s office, looking down at the datasheets that contained her findings. “Transponder recognized it as the *Wayward Arrow*, for whatever that’s worth.”

“That’s not a very common make,” Niathal remarked.

“True. Of course, just because this ship went on the Byss Run doesn’t mean that it’s the one we want. It could have been taking that route for any number of reasons.”

“Not *that* many. Most of the ships going that far into the Deep Core nowadays are science vessels. The YT-2800B is definitely not a science vessel.”

“CEC ships are very modular, easy to modify. I understand that’s their appeal.”

“Most CEC ships, yes, but not this model. It was a lightweight design that focused on speed above all else. Some local governments bought them as scout or picket ships but they never became popular with civilian freight haulers, which is why they ended up having such a limited run.”

“I bow to your knowledge of ship designs,” Kalenda leaned back in her chair. “Still, we don’t even know *if* the Corellians accessed Lyor via Empress Teta.”

“Is there another route?” Niathal asked, wondering if Alliance Intel knew of Deep Core secrets that her people did not.

“It’s always possible,” Kalenda said evasively. “We have no way of knowing what kind of intelligence the Corellians themselves had access to.”

“Nonetheless, this is worth checking out. The ship passed through Empress Teta twice, once inbound and once outbound, and the timing matches what we’d expect based on the information from Celchu.”

“Agreed. I’ll send out feelers. Admiral, they could have taken any number of routes into the Empress Teta System.”

“I know. We haven’t narrowed the search much at all. Still, I hope we accomplished something.”

Kalenda looked a little hesitant. “I’m not relying solely on this. I’ve been putting other resources on this operation as well.”

“Agents on Corellia?”

Kalenda nodded.

“What about in the Remnant?”

As expected, Kalenda wasn’t going to spill out all the details of her intelligence network inside Imperial space. She simply said, “I have agents working on multiple fronts.”

“Naturally, we won’t be letting your Imp counterpart in on this.”

“Naturally. Reige may be Pellaeon’s ally, but she’s always dug her heels in when sharing intelligence with us.”

“I can’t say I’m surprised. In a way, I’d be disappointed if she was.”

Kalenda frowned, questioning.

“I have great respect for Pellaeon,” Niathal clarified, “But the Remnant is still the Remnant. A lot of people, especially in our upper ranks, spent a lot of years fighting the Empire. I’m one of them. Reige and Pellaeon spent a lot of years fighting us. It’s foolish to think everyone on both sides can lay down all the old grudges and be true friends, not after the war we fought.”

“You’re not a very trusting woman, Admiral.”

“And you are?”

Kalenda nodded. “Fair enough. I also think-”

The comlink pinned to Niathal’s chest suddenly started buzzing. It took her by surprise; she’d told her command staff not to contact her except for dire emergencies.

With a faint premonition of danger, Niathal picked up her comlink, brought it to her mouth, and said, “This is the admiral. Report.”

“I’m sorry for interrupting, sir, but we’ve just gotten a report from JanFathal.”

It took Niathal a second to even remember the planet. Rimward on the Entralla Route, past Orinda and Obreedan, right near the edge of the Remnant. A minor planet by just about any measure, though it had lately become a bit of a trading hub for Alliance-Imperial commerce.

“Go on,” she said.

“A merchant convoy from Imperial space, twelve ships in all, was due to arrive there ten hours ago. They never made it, so the local government sent out a search party.”

“What happened?”

“The party found what was left of the convoy five lightyears up the Entralla. There wasn’t much.”

Kalenda heard it all, and her body stiffened in alarm. Niathal tried to keep her voice steady. "The convoy was destroyed?"

"Yes, sir. No survivors. Grand Admiral Pellaeon requests a meeting with you and Director Kalenda within five hours."

"Then it's a good thing you caught us together. We'll be at Anaxes as soon as we can. Niathal, out."

When she flicked off her comlink she didn't have to say a thing. Kalenda was already out of her seat and moving for the door.

By the time Niathal and Kalenda flew from Coruscant to Anaxes and docked aboard *Megador*, a second convoy had gone missing. This one had been flying inbound to Imperial space from Adumar, where it had just purchased a large supply of armaments. According to the damage reports by Adumari investigators, confirmed by a second Imperial team, the convoy had been destroyed with all weapons still aboard. The debris field was reportedly even more difficult to sift through than the one at JanFathal.

JanFathal and Adumar. Adumar was a planet the Empire had tried to court more than once, but only recently had they started buying weapons from its missile factories; it has been too close with the New Republic for many years. JanFathal, however, was a planet Pellaeon had barely thought about for decades. He'd been trying hard not to think of it at all.

Once, a long time ago, at the very start of the Clone Wars, he'd risked his first command ship and all its crew to rescue one woman at JanFathal. She'd been a spy, a Republic agent requesting evac from a hostile zone, but that wasn't why he'd done it. He'd done it because he'd been in love with her.

He'd only seen Hallena Devis once after that. That one time had been enough for him to try and forget her. Then their son had stumbled into his life and forced him to

remember. Mynar Devis was as dead as his mother now, lost heroically in the last stages of the Yuuzhan Vong War despite Pellaeon's best efforts to keep his son away from the front lines. Mother and son together were ghosts that had cycled in and out of his life over the course of fifty years, always tempting him with the splendors of a normal life and something like a normal family only to leave him in the end.

All because of a decision he'd made a lifetime ago at JanFathal.

When he'd heard of the first attack, Pellaeon had felt, selfishly, obscurely, like it was a personal affront. Then the slaughter at Adumar had smacked sense into him. He was not the one under attack, the Empire was, and whoever was doing it had enough firepower to destroy two armed convoys and leave no witness or working sensor log.

The *whoever* was what he desperately needed to discuss with Niathal and Kalenda. As they traveled to his personal salon from the far-off hangar bay, Pellaeon patched in one more call to Molgarin Reige.

Despite all the changes the galaxy had seen, despite all the trauma he'd been through in the past thirty-some years, Reige had always been a constant of sorts. In the beginning she'd drifting in and out of his life, returning each time as something new, ranging from a subordinate to a partner to something more than a friend.

At the end of everything, talking to her helped soothe his nerves, even if all she had to say was bad.

"The Moff Council's furious, as you'd imagine," she told him. The holo showed her shoulders and head, the hair once long and black now cut to a succinct steel-gray bob. "They're wondering why you haven't put out an official statement promising to rid us of the attackers."

"We don't even know who the attacks are yet. I might learn more soon. I'll speak with Niathal and Kalenda shortly."

Reige seemed to darken at her counterpart's name. "Do you trust them to give you their full intelligence reports?"

"I have the utmost professional respect for both of them." It was an evasion and they both knew it.

"People are frightened, Gilad, in a way I haven't seen since the Vong invasion. Some of the merchant convoys are refusing to cross the border. They're afraid they'll be next."

"I understand their concern. I promise, I'll do a broadcast soon."

"We need more than that. We need you back."

"I'm preparing for that, but I need to talk to Niathal and Kalenda first."

"What about *Megador*, Gilad? Will you bring that with you too?"

Pellaeon hesitated. Since being appointed as the Supreme Commander of all Alliance forces, he'd put his flag aboard *Megador* and used it for joint operations wherever possible in order to get non-Imperial personnel to trust the super star destroyer and the Imperial power it represented.

"What about *Dominion*? Where is she now?" he asked. The seven-kilometer *Bellator*-class warship was half the size of *Megador* but still a ferocious fighting vessel in her own right. When he'd taken *Megador* into the Core, he'd also promised that *Dominion* would stay behind to safeguard Imperial territory at all times.

"She was at Yaga Minor," Reige replied, "But Flennic ordered Captain Ardiffe to take her out on patrol along the border regions."

"It's a good idea to show the flag," Pellaeon said.

He didn't begrudge Kurlen Flennic many compliments. The man was a boor and had even pointed a blaster at Pellaeon once, during a crisis of leadership after the Vong invasion. Jedi magic had come in handy then, pulling the gun from his hand.

"*Megador* has an even bigger flag. We need to see it."

Pellaeon gave a short sigh. "All right. I'll leave Vernedet in charge here and come with *Megador*."

Reige's expression softened slightly. "And my son, will you bring him too?"

He'd almost heard *our son*. It was probably a trick of his old, addled mind. After all this time, after all they'd been through, Reige had never told him who Vitor's father was, and Pellaeon was still reluctant to ask. Finding Mynar, only to lose him again to the Yuuzhan Vong, was pain he didn't want to experience twice.

"I'll bring Vitor with me," he said. "He is *Megador's* captain, after all."

"I'll be glad to see him." Reige allowed a smile.

"Then that's something to look forward to," Pellaeon said, and meant it.

Reige nodded. "I look forward to seeing *you*, Gilad."

He heard the door to his salon chime. They were here. "Likewise. If you'll excuse me, I have some guests."

Reige snapped a quick salute. Pellaeon favored her with a nod and flicked off the holo.

"Enter," he called, and a moment later his two visitors stepped into the room: tall, salmon-colored Cha Niathal in her white Alliance uniform, and small dark Belindi Kalenda in the plain clothes the intelligence director always wore.

"Come, sit down." He gestured to two sofas in the middle of the room. "I'll prepare some refreshments."

He half-expected them to refuse his generosity, but neither did. Maybe they needed something to sooth the edges too. He brought a bottle of Tralian whiskey and poured two mouthfuls into three tumblers.

He sat down on the sofa opposite Niathal and Kalenda. They all took glasses in hand and drank without toasting.

Niathal's wide lips smacked audibly. "Goodness," he said, "I'll never get used to human drinks."

"I'll admit some tastes cannot be acquired," Pellaeon said, "Though I got mine long ago."

Niathal placed her glass on the low table between them. "Let's get down to business, shall we?"

"Yes, let's. I plan to depart to Imperial space soon. I'll be taking *Megador* with me and leaving Sol Vernetet in charge here. Naturally, Admiral Niathal, he'd defer to you."

The Mon Cal nodded her bulbous head, as though she'd expected all of this.

He shifted his attention slightly to Kalenda. "Before I go take command of the situation there, I need to know everything you know, however little it might seem."

"I'll admit that what we do know isn't much." Kalenda placed a datarod on the table, next to Niathal's glass. "All the sensor surveys from the JanFathal and Adumari scouting missions are here, including a full catalog of the debris."

Pellaeon scooped it up in one hand. "What about *your* scans, Admiral?"

"All data from Alliance military ships to sweep the area is there," Niathal told him.

Pellaeon slipped the datarod into his pocket. "All right. What else do you have to tell me?"

"Whoever destroyed those convoys was using an interdicator to pull those ships from hyperspace, and must have had considerable firepower to destroy them so thoroughly. To pull those specific convoys out of hyperspace required knowledge of shipping schedules, which could have been accessed either in Imperial territory or from the local authorities on Adumar and JanFathal."

"I could figure all of that out myself," Pellaeon said. "What *else* is there?"

An uncomfortable silence passed between them. Pellaeon sighed and said, "This attack seems to be designed to target Imperial citizens, specifically civilians. I don't need to tell you what kind of anxiety and anger is running rampant in Imperial space right now. That's why I'm going back there now, and taking *Megador* with me. We desperately need a show of strength."

"This is all perfectly understandable," Niathal said. "If you like, Alliance ships can serve as escorts to safeguard all Imperial ships coming and going your territory."

He shook his head. "My people will find that almost as demeaning as the attacks themselves. No, everything happening in Imperial space is mine to manage."

"I'll send parts of the Second Fleet to patrol the Alliance side of the border, then."

"Please do. I'd also appreciate you looking into your personnel and logistics reports."

"For what purpose?" asked Kalenda.

Pellaeon took a breath. "Despite all the Empire and the Alliance have been through together, there is still animosity on both sides. Half my people probably think this is some operation by Alliance captains out for revenge, sanctioned or rogue."

"Will they accept our assurances if we find that this isn't?" Niathal asked. She said *they*, but they all knew she meant *you*.

"Once the attacks have stopped and those responsible have been punished," Pellaeon said carefully, "We can talk about acceptance then. Right now I have lives to protect. That's the most important thing."

"Our goal is the same," Niathal insisted.

Pellaeon wanted to believe her. He didn't think either she or Kalenda were lying to him. But in the end, it wasn't mere hysteria to think angry ex-rebels were attacking their Imperial allies. It was, logically, the most likely conclusion.

If that conclusion played out, it would almost certainly mean Imperial removal from the Galactic Alliance. They all knew it but none of them would say it, so instead they tip-toed around it and pretended they always had and always would be on the same side.

"Even when I'm at Bastion, I want to be kept informed of everything you find," he said.

"Of course," Kalenda nodded.

"Anything you know comes directly to me, to *Megador*. Is that understood?"

"Whatever you wish, sir," Niathal said.

The *sir* was a nice touch. He wondered how far she'd really follow his orders when the cohesion of the Alliance was at stake.

He wondered how far he'd go to hold it together.

In the end, there was too much uncertainty. Pellaeon said, "I plan to leave within ten hours."

They both nodded. Niathal said, "I hope this is resolved quickly, Grand Admiral, so you can return to us."

He felt she meant that. He said, "Nothing would please me more. We've accomplished a lot over the last two years. I don't want it to end badly."

He meant that too.

Turr Phennir had no idea how much play the attacks had gotten in other parts of the galaxy, but in the Empire, the news networks were covering it nonstop. Talking-head analysts picked apart every bit of information that had been declassified, and pundits weighed in with various opinions on what should be done about these assaults on the citizenry, economy, and fundamental sovereignty of the Galactic Empire.

Most of them favored a robust military response, including interdicator ships, pickets, and star destroyers patrolling the effected shipping lanes. What split the pundits was whether the Alliance could be trusted to help solve this issue or whether the Empire should do it alone. The pundits seemed split almost evenly on the issue, which was a sign that neither Pellaeon nor the Moff Council had decided how to handle it either. What united them all was a patriotic outrage at these cowardly terrorist attacks against the great Galactic Empire.

Phennir, like everybody else, felt outrage: at the attacks, at Pellaeon's slow response, and at Coruscant's even more pathetic 'expression of concern.' But you could only get outraged for so long before you started to get tired of it, and he was very glad when Assyra Cyrillian commed him to say she was back on Bastion and they they should meet up for a drink.

"I ran into Belkaron the other day. At the Old Glory," he told her. They were meeting in a much finer place than that, one of the clubs reserved for active, high-ranking military

personnel such as the current commander of the 181st Imperial Fighter Group.

“How is Davit doing?” Cyrillian asked. The bloodstripes down the sides of her black uniform were sure to grab attention, which was why she’d reserved a small private room with a view overlooking the capital’s lit-up skyline.

“Flight instructor for civvies, he says.”

“At least he’s keeping busy.”

“It’s amazing how little the man’s changed in twenty-five years,” Phennir grunted.

Cyrillian smiled a little, maybe at a memory. She and Belkaron had come on as squad leaders for Phennir at the same time. She’d always been more serious and ambitious than him, which was why she was the general now and Belkaron was coaching civvie brats. Even though she was pushing fifty, she was still an attractive woman, with long brown hair and large, alert eyes on a wide, tanned face.

“And what about you, Turr?” she asked. “Are you busy?”

Twenty-five years ago she’d have never called him by his first, name or by anything other than ‘general’ or ‘leader.’ Some things certainly did change.

“Enjoying the sedentary life, I suppose,” Phennir said. He couldn’t quite look her in the eye.

“You deserve it.”

“I thought I did. I thought there weren’t any more wars left to fight.”

“You think we’re at war now?”

“We’re in bloody something. Nobody can figure out *what*, apparently, which doesn’t make things any better. What’s it like at Yaga Minor?”

She thought for a moment before responding. “Everyone is angry. Confused. Anxious.”

“Sounds like Bastion.”

“If something *does* happen, it will affect Yaga Minor first. It will hit the One-Eighty-First.”

“I’m sure. You have them running more readiness drills?”

She gave him an insulted look. "The moment we heard of the first attack I started them running sorties."

Phennir leaned back in his chair. "And yet with all that's going on, you flew out the Bastion?"

"I came here to see you, General."

He frowned. "I'm not a general. You are."

"What I am now is what you made me."

"I don't know what you think I can do to help."

Disappointment showed on her face. Phennir was surprised how much it hurt him.

"Don't you want to help the Empire?" she asked.

"Of course I do," Phennir said. "I always have. I've devoted my *life* to fighting for it."

"You're a soldier who needs a war."

He frowned. "You're a pilot, Assyra, not a psychoanalyst. If you came here for me, tell me exactly what it is you want."

"I'd much rather show you. Come to Yaga Minor with me."

"That's not good enough. I need more."

"Do you have anything better to be doing here?"

"You're not winning me over."

"I'm sorry," she sighed, shook her head. "I know you don't like to go into battle without getting full intel."

"Is that where you're taking me, Assyra? Into a battle?"

She leaned forward intently. "Someone has to defend the Empire, Turr. Right now, the Moffs are sitting on their hands, without a clue what they're doing. Pellaeon is off in the Core playing games with his alien friends instead of protecting the Empire like he should be."

Phennir had always been of two minds about Pellaeon. The man was more reliable, more patriotic, than all those dangerously charismatic warlords like Zsinj and Harrsk. At the same time, he lacked their boldness, and had always seemed content to fight a defensive war, drawing the Empire deeper and deeper into its shell while the rebellion slowly surged up to swallow the rest of the galaxy whole.

“Do you think the attacks were timed to coincide with Pellaeon’s war games in the Core?” he asked her.

“Very likely. These aren’t just random pirate attacks, Turr. Someone is making an assault on Imperial sovereignty. I wouldn’t be surprised at all if it’s rebel agents.”

“Omas isn’t bold enough to try and start a war.”

“He doesn’t have to be. It could be some of his admirals. It could be just a handful of rogue commanders. Whoever it is, they’re well-armed, and they’re slaughtering Imperial citizens. Someone has to do something about it.”

“With Pellaeon gone that leaves Reige in charge. She may be more of a spook than a naval commander, but she’s still a smart woman.”

“She’s also Pellaeon’s woman. In more ways than one, or so some people say. She won’t do anything without her master’s approval.”

“Then what *are* you suggesting? Just *tell* me.”

She leaned in closer and lowered her voice, even though there was no one in the room to hear them. “Some of us at Yaga Minor are putting together a task force. Once we figure out where the rebels will attack next, I’m taking the One-Eighty-First with me. Come with us, Turr. Please.”

Phennir drew in breath. “What you’re talking about could be considered treason.”

“Fighting rebel scum is never treason.”

“We don’t know that it *is* the rebels.”

“Who else would it be?”

“Who’s in charge of this project? Who’s keeping Pellaeon and Reige from finding out?”

“We have a number of high-ranking officers. Moff Flennic is coordinating it all.”

Phennir fought a frown. Flennic was Yaga Minor’s local moff and had been since just before Endor. Even among the ranks of senior Imperial officers he was considered a relic. Flennic had always been a hardliner and an enemy of Pellaeon. He was also a blowhard with more experience in political corruption than military operations.

“Flennic is a fool. You can’t trust him.”

“I don’t, but for now our goals are the same.”

“He’s just using you to try to throw out Pellaeon.”

“As I said, our goals are the same.”

Phennir stared down at the tabletop. “Assyra, you’re risking your life. And the entire One-Eighty-First.”

“It’s a soldier duty to risk her life to protect her nation. Are you a soldier, Turr? I thought you were.”

“I am,” he said defensively.

“Then be a soldier, Turr. Come with me to Yaga Minor. We’ll do what needs to be done to keep the Empire safe.”

He looked up at those dark eyes and found he had no more ripostes. If he turned her down, if he walked out of this restaurant and back to his retirement and left Cyrillian and the 181st to ruin themselves in one last desperate gamble to save the Empire, he’d regret it. He’d regret it the rest of his life.

Holding her eyes, he said, “All right. When do we leave?”

One of the most important lessons Tycho Celchu had learned over the years was: When in doubt, ask your wife.

“Things have gotten messy really fast,” he told Winter. It was night in Galactic City, and the endless city lights drifting through their window and into their dim apartment. “Niathal and Kalenda have started refocusing their attention on the attacks in Imperial space. They’ve had to pull people off the Corellian investigation.”

“Do you think there might be a connection?” Winter asked. She sat beside him on the sofa and leaned forward slightly, so the white of her hair fell half-over her face.

“I have no rodding clue. I have to admit the timing seems off.”

“But from what you told me, the Corellian search party to Lyor came up with nothing. The Imperial base was destroyed a few years ago.”

“That’s what we’re guessing. We don’t know anything for sure, not really.” He sighed and ran a hand through his gray

hair. "What about your connections? Did they find anything?"

"My connections nowadays are mostly retired and mostly out of the loop. At least, they're *less* out of the loop than you are, now that you're talking to Kalenda."

"I figured as much. Thanks for checking anyway."

"What about Iella? Did you talk to her?"

"I did. She's going to try and prod her source for more information. We've got the make and model of the ship they used, *probably*, but even that's not enough to be certain of anything on."

Winter thought for a moment. "If it *is* connected, I can't see how. Sal-Solo wouldn't hunt down missing warships just to attacks the Remnant. He doesn't care about the Empire one way or another. If anything, he's probably sympathetic."

"Say the Corellians didn't get that ship. Say somebody else has it. *They* could be the ones attacking the Remnant."

"But who?"

"I don't know. There's a lot of folks out there who still hold a hard grudge against anything Imperial."

"I can't blame them," Winter breathed.

Tycho reached down and grabbed her hand. "The people who destroyed Alderaan are dead. They have been for a long time."

"And there's still billions who refuse to believe Tarkin did it. Or worse, they say we deserved it."

"There's also people in the Remnant who really believe it was wrong, and who are trying to change things for the better."

"Pellaeon's won you over, has he?"

Maybe he had. It had happened quickly but quietly, when Tycho wasn't paying attention.

"Have you informed Pellaeon about this yet?" Winter asked.

He shook his head. "They all agreed it was a bad idea."

She asked, "Do you agree with that?"

“Not particularly.”

“Why?”

“The best way to find the ships, or whatever, that were at Lyor is to ask somebody who might know.”

“You think that somebody is Pellaeon?”

“If not him, somebody else in the Remnant. He stands the best chance of finding out.”

“Even if he does find out the truth, do you think he’ll tell *you*?”

Tycho sighed. “And here I thought we’re all supposed to be on the same side.”

“That never happens. There’s always competing factions to everything. The Galactic Alliance, definitely, but even in the Remnant, or the old Empire, even the Rebellion, they all had different groups with different agendas all wrestling for power. It’s inevitable. It’s politics.”

“I hate politics.”

She smiled a little and roughed his hair. “Thank the Force for that. I couldn’t imagine being married to a politician.”

“Worked for Han Solo.”

“Well, I’m not Han Solo, and you’re no Princess Leia.”

“And thank the Force for *that*.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she mused, “I think you could have all sorts of fun with your hair if you grow it out.”

“I don’t. People would think I’ve gone senile or trying to rediscover my youth.”

“Yes, we wouldn’t want them to be wrong on the second count, would we?”

Against himself, Tycho was feeling a little lighter, but only a little. More seriously, he said, “I think what we need to do now is contact Pellaeon, tell him what’s going on. I think it’s our best chance of breaking this impasse. And it shows we’re all in this together.”

Winter touched his hair again. “What about Niathal and Omas?”

“Well... We’ll just have to make sure they don’t find out.”

“I like it when you’re devious.”

"I expected you to object." He glanced at her face, dim in the evening dim light.

She considered a moment. "I have plenty of reservations. But if you really think this is the only way to move forward, you should do it."

Her trust gave him the confidence he'd needed. He reached out and squeezed her thigh. "Thanks. You've still got the encryption system set up?"

"How else do you think I made all those calls today?"

"Just what I wanted to hear."

He got up from the sofa. She didn't. He bent over low, placed one kiss on her forehead, then hurried off to their bedroom.

Their apartment had one transmitter used for normal communications, kept in the kitchen, and a second built into the dresser they kept to the right of their bed. Winter had inherited it from her old boss, Airen Cracken, and it was sophisticated enough to send messages through a triple-layer of encryption only the best slicers could crack. Best of all, it routed the signal through several proxies, making it almost impossible to trace back to their apartment.

The one downside was that only sophisticated machines could receive and decrypt its messages, but Tycho wasn't worried. The systems on Pellaeon's *Megador* were sure to be just as advanced.

When the holo came on, it was a clear head-and-shoulders image of the grand admiral. He would have received a transmission marked as urgent but without naming the sender; nonetheless, he hid his surprise well.

"General Celchu," he said, "Thank you for your call."

"I'm glad I caught you before you left for Imperial space, sir."

Pellaeon inclined his head slightly. "Would you mind telling me what this is about?"

"I want to say first, sir, that this transmission is specially encrypted. No one, and I mean *no one*, will be able to see it except for you."

“How comforting. Please get on with it.”

Tycho swallowed. He hadn’t thought about what, exactly, Pellaeon needed to know, so he decided to stick to the basics. “Sir, I recently came in the possession of certain intelligence I believe you should be aware of.”

The grand admiral’s face set hard. “Go on.”

“I recently learned that the Corellian government, or at least agents of Thrackan Sal-Solo, sent a scouting mission into the Deep Core. Apparently, they were searching for left-behind Imperial hardware.”

He didn’t need to remind Pellaeon that his own flagship had been found in one of Blitzzer Harrsk’s abandoned shipyards. He continued, “According to my sources, they searched one system in particular but found nothing except the blasted-out ruins of a research facility and the crashed remains of an orbital docking station.”

“What system?”

“Lyor.”

Tycho watched Pellaeon closely for a reaction. Even with the clear holo, he spotted no tell. The grand admiral said, “Thank you for informing me, General, but as you know, all Imperial holdings in the Deep Core have been abandoned for over twenty-five years.”

Tycho licked dry lips. “What my source also said, sir, was that the base seems to have been destroyed within the past *two* years, three at maximum.”

That got a reaction. Pellaeon blinked once, twice in honest surprise, then said in his best even tone, “Thank you, General. I will look into it.”

“Please do, sir.”

For a long moment they stared at each other across lightyears and the minute blue blurs of their holographic projectors. Then Pellaeon reached forward. His image shrunk to nothing.

Tycho stood there in the dark of his bedroom. He took one deep breath, then another, and wondered if he’d done the right thing.

PART IV: LUSANKYA
12 YEARS ABY

The flat gray dagger of the super star destroyer *Lusankya* seemed to run forever above Tycho Celchu's head as his X-wing burst out of its ventral hangar bay and sped toward the massive vessel's nose. The mottled greens, browns, and blues of the planet Tyan glowed faintly in reflected sunlight. Far beyond *Lusankya*'s bow but vectoring toward them across Tyan's lower orbit were a pair of off-white Imperial star destroyers, as much the enemy as they'd ever be.

It still felt surreal, launching out of a nineteen-kilometer-long behemoth built as the sister ship to Vader's dreaded *Executor*. Rogue Squadron had been doing it for almost six months now but it didn't seem right. When the Imperials had rolled into this section of the Mid-Rim with their super star destroyer *Reaper*, New Republic command had seen fit to put their own captured giant into action.

A female voice buzzed in his headset, saying, "All fighters, this is *Lusankya*. Detect two incoming fighter waves, one from the destroyers and one from the planet."

"Do we have a make on those ships?" Tycho asked. His own scanners marked incoming hostiles but nothing more than that, not at the current range.

"Negative, Rogue Leader, though the velocity of the ones from Tyan are in line with TIE/d fighters."

"Copy that," Tycho grimaced. He'd expected as much. "Orders?"

After a slight pause, a familiar voice came on. "Rogue, Knave, and Slash Squadrons, try to head off the droids.

Protect Spotter Squadron. Everybody else, form a protective screen and block out the orbital hostiles.”

“Understood, Wedge. Will comply.” Tycho flicked his comlink to the Rogue Squadron channel and said, “Everybody here that?”

“Affirmative,” Hobbie said. “Time to tangle with droids, then. Just what I wanted.”

“We’re here to make you happy, Five,” Inyri Forge chirped.

“Cut the chatter, people. Into flights, diamond formations.”

Tycho dropped his fighter into a dive toward the planet. It quickly filled his viewport; *Lusankya* had already dipped about as low into orbit as was safe for a vessel of her size. Tycho watched on his scanners as his flight formed behind his X-wing. Inyri took the back of the diamond formation while his right and left flanks were respectively taken by two of the Rogues’ newest additions, a Krish named Ligg Panat and a Quarren called Kral Nevil. Both had started this campaign green and already worked their way up to ace status, though the fight had been grueling enough that neither of them seemed to take satisfaction from it.

Tycho checked his forward sensors and spotted a swarm of robotic TIE fighters coming to meet them. They were tearing through the upper atmosphere at g-forces that would have rendered a human pilot unconscious. Given the target waiting for them on Tyan’s surface, he’d been expecting to fight some of the nimble craft.

He’d first encountered them during the cloned Emperor’s invasion of Mon Calamari, where they’d been mass-produced in the bellies of the massive World Devastators, well-armed mobile manufacturing plants that could tear open a planet and process its raw materials into new war machines. Brutal and ravenous, they’d struck him as a perfect symbol for the Empire itself.

Most of them had been destroyed at Mon Cal or with the Emperor’s Deep Core base world of Byss, but as they’d

already discovered during the opening battles of this campaign, a deadly handful had survived.

“Lead, can you pick up that Devastator?” asked Gavin Darklighter, the third flight leader.

“Not yet, Nine. Lotta storms down there. Too much interference. Stand by.” Tycho said, then switched his frequency. “Spotter One, you there?”

“We read you, Rogue Lead,” came the reply from the lead skipray blastboat. While normally offensive vessels, three of the shuttle-sized craft had been refitted with advanced sensor equipment that could spot the World Devastator on the surface and relay its location back to *Lusankya*.

“Have you spotted our target?” asked Tycho.

“We’re trying to pinpoint it now. It seems to be somewhere *inside* the main storm cluster on the south continent.”

“Try to be fast about it. I don’t know how long we can keep those droid fighters off your back.”

“Affirmative. Good luck, Rogue Leader.”

“You too,” Tycho said, and switched off the link.

He felt a sudden need to call *Lusankya* and talk to Wedge himself. He’d led Rogue Squadron through dozens of missions since Wedge had finally, reluctantly, accepted a promotion out of the cockpit. Mon Calamari had been one of the first such flights and knowing there was another World Devastator down there was putting him on edge.

“I see them, Lead! On visual!” said Hobbie’s wingmate, a sharp-eyed Pachithip named Beledeez.

Tycho held his breath and squinted at the dark gray storm clouds swirling ahead of them. For a moment that was all he saw; then he noted dozens of tiny dark flecks spiraling out of the clouds like a swarm of angry flit-gnats.

“Shields up, everybody,” Tycho called. “Wait for my signal, then fire on my mark, lasers only. Save your torps for bigger targets.”

Their proton torpedoes also had smart guidance systems that would be very useful in taking down nimble droid TIEs,

but he didn't want to have to fight a World Devastator with nothing in his torpedo tubes.

He was about to call Knave and Slash leaders to tell them the same, but the droid TIEs were on them too fast. Green flecks of plasma splashed across his shields as the TIEs went screaming by, then wheeled around for another pass. Tycho broke hard to port; the rest of his diamond followed. The E-wings from Knave and Slash Squadrons broke formation and began dogfighting with the nimble droids one-on-one, but the Rogues kept in groups of four to better absorb attacks from the TIEs.

When Tycho had first fought these ships at Mon Calamari, they'd been commanded by a signal sent from Byss and relayed by the World Devastators, who themselves were all slaved to obey commands from the cloned Emperor's capital. The battle had been won by one clever R2 unit who'd found a way to jam the signal and turn the Devastators and TIEs all against each other.

Pellaeon, unfortunately, had learned from others' mistakes. It was a rare quality for an Imperial and it made him more dangerous an enemy than his middling career record suggested.

The Devastators now all acted independently, like normal starships, and the TIE/d fighters were linked by a signal broadcasted by their base ship, be it star destroyer, carrier or Devastator. The command signal was constantly filtered through a seemingly-random algorithm that was impossible to track.

Tycho settled himself behind a pair of droid fighters and opened fire. He clipped one on its elongated rectangular solar panel and sent it spiraling back to the clouds. Another volley of red lasers shot out from his starboard flank and speared the other through its ball cockpit.

"Nice shooting, Four," Tycho said.

"Thanks, Lead," Panat sounded flush. "I-"

"Cut it!" Inyri said, "Two behind us!"

"Understood." Tycho glanced at his scanners. He pulled his X-wing into a steep climb and the others followed. G-forces pinned him to the back of his seat. The TIEs behind them, not constrained by any pilots, accelerated faster.

"Lead," Nevil groaned, "They're gaining."

"I know. Get ready to break, starburst formation, and dive for the planet. Five seconds."

"Oh, great," Inyri groaned.

"Three seconds," Tycho called. "Two. One. *Break!*"

All four ships peeled apart in different directions, but the end result was the same. Their noses swung over their tails until they'd all turned to face the planet. Just as blackness crept into the sides of Tycho's vision, he gunned the engines and plunged his X-wing toward the clouds below.

For the Rogues, it was a crazy maneuver that put the pilot at risk of a blackout. For the droid TIEs, it was ridiculously easy.

"Lead," said Nevil, "They're still on us."

"Not for long," Tycho said.

Another diamond of four X-wings cut in from the side and speared the trailing TIEs with a volley of red laserfire. The ships burst into flame and wreckage tumbled out of the sky.

"Thanks, Five," Tycho called. "Knew I could count on you."

"Stunt like that, you're bound to grab attention." He could hear the wry grin in Hobbie's voice.

Before Tycho could respond, he saw something surge through the clouds directly below. He knew what it was without seeing and pulled his control stick against his chest. He executed a steep pull-up and the rest of his flight followed.

"Oh, kark, look at the size of that thing!" Beleddez moaned.

Tycho tipped his X-wing to the side to get a better view from his cockpit as the World Devastator rose from the clouds. Swirls of gray vapor spilled off its black hull. Turbolaser cannons attached to its broad rectangular body

began firing madly at the starfighters above. The whole thing had to have been as long as an *Imperial*-class star destroyer and twice as massive.

"Rogue Lead, this is Spotter One," a voice said in his headset. "We're tracking the Devastator now."

"Glad you could manage," Tycho gritted his teeth.

The blastboat pilot ignored his sarcasm. "It's gaining velocity. Looks like it's planning to break the atmosphere."

"Copy. Let's get the hell out of its way." Tycho switched his connection to the flagship and called, "*Lusankya*, do you see the target?"

"We've got telemetry, ready to begin bombardment," the woman said.

"Good. We're bugging out now." Tycho switched back to his squadron freq. "All Rogues, break and run. Give *Lusankya* a clear line of fire."

"Understood," Gavin said. "Let's go!"

Tycho angled his fighter toward space and ran. He couldn't spot the flagship but as he gained altitude and peeled back atmosphere he'd be able to see *Lusankya*'s friendly dagger.

"Watch out!" Hobbie called, "Incoming TIEs!"

A swarm of robotic fighters swept in from one side. Tycho had his shields on full and absorbed the attacks, but they rocked him hard in his cockpit and the energy scatter on his shields obscured his vision for a few awful seconds.

Then he heard a staticky scream over his headset.

"Six's been hit!" Hobbie called. "Ajekar, do you read? *Ajekar*?"

Through a burst of static, Beleddez said, "Port engines bad... fuel igniter.... Oh, *kark*!"

There was a flash of light in the corner of Tycho's vision. He strained against his crash webbing to see Beleddez's X-wing flare and tumble out of the sky.

"Six, eject!" he called.

A spear of green turbolaser fire lanced up from the World Devastator and caught the falling X-wing, vaporizing it immediately.

They'd come all this way, six long months of fighting, and not lost a single Rogue, not until today.

Gasps and swears bounced over the squad channel. Tycho cut them off immediately. "All Rogues, break formation. Dance your way back home. Give 'em moving targets."

A few pilots clicked affirmative. The X-wings splintered and began to wind their separate ways out of Tyan's atmosphere. The blue of the sky peeled away to reveal twinkling stars and the flashing laserfire of combat far overhead. It took Tycho's eyes a moment to adjust to the darkness. He could spot *Lusankya's* long dagger, a more welcome sight than he'd ever thought it would be.

Then he saw *Lusankya's* first turbolaser volley fall toward the planet's atmosphere to meet the rising World Devastator. There was a tiny pause after the first shot, the tracking shot, fell past Tycho's dancing little ship. Then destruction fell like rain.

Colonel Turr Phennir felt an uncharacteristic surge of fear as he dropped into a sharp dive toward *Lusankya's* hull. Turbolaser and anti-starfighter cannons flashed hot light in his face, sometimes even scattering plasma against the shields of his TIE Defender, and he jerked his ship back and forth to make his target as hard to hit as possible.

He heard a shout, and a burst of static over his helmet speaker, and he knew the enemy flak had claimed one of his pilots.

"Get ready to tighten formation," he said. "On my mark."

His flight leaders clicked affirmative. The super star destroyer's black superstructure jumped up to meet them.

"Mark!" Phennir said, and pulled his ship into a level flight just before he scraped *Lusankya's* shields.

All eleven remaining fighters in Red Squad fell in tight behind him. They raced toward the destroyer's command tower, still some five kilometers away, flying just above the invisible energy shields and just below the range of fire of most of the gunnery towers.

It was a precise maneuver, and incredibly dangerous to most pilots, which was why the 181st had been given the job. Even after losing Baron Fel, they were still the best fighter unit in the Empire. Phennir had seen to that.

As they climbed the superstructure toward *Lusankya's* bridge, one anti-starfighter turret got a track on them. Red laserfire splattered on Phennir's shields, then shifted to spray the other ships behind him.

There was another shout, a burst of static, and Phennir saw another marker wink out on his helmet's heads-up display.

"We lost Nine," Red Squad's leader reported. The frustration was clear in his voice. "Shot bounced him right into the shields."

"Eye on the target, Red Leader," Phennir reminded him. Lieutenant Devis was a good pilot but sometimes he let his heart and gut override his head.

To his credit, Devis said nothing else. The remaining eleven TIE Defenders raced toward the dark tower up ahead, so reminiscent of an *Imperial*-class destroyer's command bridge despite being attached to a far larger vessel.

"Marks targets," Phennir said.

They'd all been given an attack plan before the battle began and losing two ships wouldn't change the primary goal of disabling the command tower's shield generators. Once that was done, squads of the disposal TIE/d fighters would start hurling themselves at *Lusankya's* vulnerable bridge. What the rebels had accomplished through blind luck against *Executor* at Endor, the Empire would now accomplish against her sister ship.

That was Phennir's plan, anyway, and it had gotten the okay from the highest level. Whatever else could be said for Admiral Pellaeon, he knew when to trust his subordinates.

Phennir dropped his targeting reticule on the shield generator. It raced to meet them but he didn't slow down.

"Mark," he said, and squeezed the trigger.

Twenty-two red torpedo tails lanced out from Red Squad. Phennir broke, as did the others behind him. Turbolaser fire

jumped out at them as they pulled into the turrets' firing arc. He corkscrewed his fighter over *Lusankya's* command tower and down her long tail until the light from her red thrust engines momentarily washed out the stars.

It was only when they were clear that he checked his scanners.

The command tower's shields were straining to absorb the impact, but still alive. He cursed and said, "Red Squad, form behind me. Fall back to *Relentless*." Once there, they could group with Green or Blue Squad and attempt another attack run.

"Colonel," Red Five said, "We're missing Red Leader."

Phennir cursed again and checked his scanners. Impossibly, a little green mark was corkscrewing around *Lusankya's* command tower.

"Devis!" he snapped. "What the devil are you doing?"

"Trying one more shot, sir."

"Idiot! Regroup at the stern! That's an order!"

He swung his TIE Defender around to get a better view. Devis' fighter was flying literal circles around the neck of the command tower. Gun turrets tried to trace him when he made turns but his maneuvers were too tight, and the rebel gunners wouldn't risk firing on their own bridge, not when shields were already weak.

Phennir saw it on his scanners, then: a flight of E-wings racing to intercept Devis.

"Pull out *now*, Red Leader!"

In another time, Phennir would have left Devis to die by his own recklessness. Now, the Empire needed all the good pilots it could get. Especially the reckless, risk-taking ones.

"Red Squad, on me," he growled, and pushed his fighter forward.

As the E-wings got close, Devis pulled his TIE ahead of the bridge, then braked, spun nose-over-stern to face the command deck, and fired off two more torps. They lanced out toward the spherical shield generator to the right of the bridge and impacted. The explosion tore a massive hole in

the left side of the generator. Flame and debris belched into space.

A few Red Squad pilots cheered as Devis raced back to join formation. Phennir didn't begrudge them, or Devis. Nowadays, the Empire had to celebrate any success.

The E-wings pursuing Devis peeled off to protect the command tower. Phennir commed the crew of the World Devastator now rising into Tyan's lower orbit and said, "The port bridge shield is down. You can begin your attacks."

Ensign Cha Niathal had spent the past six months in *Lusankya's* crew pit, and for the first time she was actually afraid of dying on this magnificent vessel.

From the gunnery station down in the crew pit, it was hard to tell, but she thought General Antilles looked worried too. He stood steady at the tactical station, jaw firmly set, hands behind his back, giving curt orders to the section chiefs. Unlike some humans, Antilles was not prone to grandiose overreaction, but his fast fidgety movements betrayed a rare anxiety.

The gunnery crew chief said, "All dorsal cannons, keep firing on the Devastator. Target the main repulsors."

That was more or less what they'd been doing, but Niathal was happy to comply. Only three years ago, those monstrosities had descended on her homeworld and ravaged its beautiful floating cities. Niathal was young enough and lucky enough not to have lived very long with Dac under the Empire's heel, and the coming of the World Devastators had been a shocking end to years of liberty and calm.

Immediately after they'd been defeated, she'd signed up for the Republic military. Despite that victory against the Devastators, she'd known there'd be more wars to fight.

Working the semi-automated weapon batteries, Niathal trained her assigned turbolaser towers on the Devastator. It had risen clear of the atmosphere now and was rising steadily toward *Lusankya*. Its automated TIE/d fighters were

racing upward, probably intent on climbing across *Lusankya's* long superstructure and attacking her bridge before they could get the emergency shields online.

There was nothing Niathal could do about that threat of imminent death. She had orders and she tried to put everything else out of her mind. Her turbolaser attacks speared down at the repulsorlift generators that hung off the corners of the Devastator like four flat feet.

On Dac, she'd watched the sky was one mammoth Devastator sucked the star destroyer *Emancipator* into its fiery furnace-mouth and swallowed it whole. It had been a stunning, terrifying sight, and she took solace in the fact that no Devastator could swallow all nineteen kilometers of *Lusankya*.

"Missile batteries," the gunnery lieutenant called, "Open fire!"

Concussion missiles joined the stream of turbolaser fire. The amount of energy they were bombarding the Devastator with was astounding; if they'd been aiming at the planet's surface that could have easily reduced a major city to ash.

Distantly, she heard Antilles call for more fighters to defend the bridge. She heard a tactical officer report a swarm of TIE/d fighters climbing over *Lusankya's* bow and making a run up its superstructure.

Niathal barely noticed. She just kept on firing at the Devastator until, finally, the torrent of destructive power finally did its job.

Both forward repulsorlifts exploded at once. The Devastator seemed to swing down until its great furnace-mouth was pointed at the planet. *Lusankya* continued to pound its superstructure until the behemoth shuddered and began to all toward the planet.

Cheers went up over the bridge. Niathal watched on her screen as the Devastator flared with the friction of atmospheric entry and kept falling.

Above the clamor, someone shouted, "Incoming droid fighters!"

Niathal raised her head to look over the rim of the crew pit. She could, just barely, make out the thrust-glow of red X-wing engines as Republic ships swooped down to defend the from the TIE/d fighters. She saw the flash of explosions, saw General Antilles' jaw clench tight. Suddenly the entire bridge rocked violent; lights flashed; people gasped in shock and terror.

But then the shaking stopped, the lights came back on. Antilles shouted for damage reports. One TIE/d had successfully rammed, opening decks three and four to the vacuum, but emergency bulkheads sealed off the damaged areas. Casualties unknown.

Despite the damage, despite the nervous clamor that fell over the bridge, Niathal felt satisfied. For three years she'd wanted nothing more than to send one of the clones Emperor's monstrous creations to hell. With that accomplished, they could do anything. *Lusankya* had more than enough weapons and troops to subdue the planet below, destroy the two remaining Impstars, and clean up the attacking TIE fighters.

Then, loud and clear above the noise, she heard the tactical officer report, "General Antilles, *Reaper* has entered the system."

Admiral Gilad Pellaeon stood on the bridge of his super star destroyer and stared ahead at the muddy-green marble ahead. He could, too, make out the white wedges of *Relentless* and *Death's Head* and the far longer dagger of *Lusankya*, so like his own flagship save for the bright red Rebellion crests painted on either flank.

He turned to address *Reaper's* captain. "Do we have a reading on the World Devastator?"

Captain Arnef frowned. "I'm sorry, sir. We just got a call from Captain Dorja. He says *Lusankya* destroyed the Devastator just before we arrived."

Pellaeon fought a scowl. The Devastators might have wreaked terrors on Mon Calamari, but their ability to

convert raw minerals into useful material was especially valuable to a resource-strapped Empire. He'd set the few Devastators he'd managed to recover from the Deep Core on harvesting missions to scarcely-populated worlds like Tyan and set them to work on uninhabited portions of those planets. To the rebels, of course, they were still infamous superweapons and very tempting targets, even if they were no longer armed and staffed like prime combat vessels.

Arnef bent low for a word from the comm officer, then relayed, "Admiral, Dorja also says that the One-Eighty-First has damaged the shields around *Lusankya's* bridge. They're trying to overwhelm it with droid fighters, to limited success."

Pellaeon was also of two minds about the TIE/d ships recovered from the Deep Core. He could throw dozens at the enemy and not have to worry about wasting good Imperial lives, but they still brought to mind the Trade Federation ships he'd spent his early adulthood fighting. He'd seen them as coward's weapons then and couldn't overcome distaste at using them now.

But, as with the World Devastators, the once-Galactic Empire needed every tool it could get.

"Tell Colonel Phennir to regroup for another attack on *Lusankya*," Pellaeon said. "Tell him to wait until we're approaching firing range. I want a firing solution planned for the destroyer."

"Very good, sir" Arnef went to go relay orders.

Pellaeon looked out the viewport. *Lusankya*, all nineteen deadly clicks of it, was looming larger and larger. Just ten years ago, the sight of her sister ship had filled him with pride and confidence. He couldn't feel either now, even as he commanded a vessel just as long and just and powerful.

"Admiral," the tactical officer called, "*Lusankya* is breaking for outer orbit."

"She's running," Arnef muttered.

Despite his anxiety, Pellaeon felt disappointment. *Reaper* and *Lusankya* had engaged in exchanges earlier in the

campaign, at Darkon and Traval-Pacor, but both fights had ended almost as soon as they'd begun. It seemed like Antilles wasn't willing to risk his ship in a brutal slugging match. Pellaeon hadn't been, not then, but it was starting to seem like *Reaper* and *Lusankya* would spend years stalking each other through the Mid Rim.

"Can we intercept her before the exits the gravity well?" Pellaeon asked.

"Negative." Arnef shook his head.

It was pointless to send *Relentless* and *Death's Head* after the far bigger vessel. He suspected Colonel Phennir was eager for another run at *Lusankya*, but there wouldn't be enough time to plan and execute a proper attack.

"Tell Phennir to fall back to *Relentless*," Pellaeon ordered. "The droid fighters can keep attacking, but not the One-Eighty-First. Understood?"

"Of course, sir."

Pellaeon looked out the viewport. The super star destroyer's red engines blazed bright as it slipped away from the planet, away from the two star destroyers that had been set to guard it. The rebels had failed to capture Tyan, but they'd destroyed one of the last World Devastators before retreating. Pellaeon could hardly call it a victory for either side, but he'd try to spin it as an Imperial one for the Moff Council.

"Until we meet again," Pellaeon muttered, right before *Lusankya* winked into hyperspace.

The snow-covered surface of Qiilura's northern hemisphere turned slowly beneath them. The viewport of *Lusankya's* conference room gave a good view of both the planet and the support fleet arrayed around the super star destroyer. *Yakez*, a captured star destroyer of the more standard *Imperial*-class, floated next to the MC60i Mon Calamari interdicator *Mon Dromeda*. Two more Mon Cal ships, the big MC80A *Poesy* and the slimmer, narrow-bodied MC30 frigate *Mon Alora*, sat further away. Though

they couldn't be seen from the viewport, the DP20 Corellian anti-starfighter gunships *Viridian* and *Cerulean* hovered off *Lusankya*'s stern.

Like most things on *Lusankya*, the conference room was oversized, coolly gray, severe-looking, and overall very Imperial, despite the years the New Republic had spent refitting the battered vessel after its capture over Thyferra.

Nonetheless, Tycho Celchu felt quite comfortable as he sat at the end of the long oval conference table. He leaned back in his chair, put his feet up on that dark, polished tabletop, and sipped from his mug: hot caf with just a pinch of Johrian whiskey.

Wedge mirrored his friend's posture. He had a datapad resting in his lap and was reviewing its contents.

"They say *Lusankya*'s bridge shields should be good as new in two days," Wedge said.

"Good to know. It sounds like things get pretty hairy."

"For a few minutes I thought we might end up like *Executor*."

"I heard it was One-Eighty-First fighters that did it."

"That's right."

"Well, I'm glad we didn't have to face them again. We already lost one pilot yesterday."

"I'm sorry about Beleddez."

Tycho sighed and looked into his cup. "I still have to write the letter to his family. It's hard. I haven't had to do many of them so far, which is good but..."

"They do get easier with practice," Wedge admitted. "That's the worst part. It's one thing I don't miss about being in an X-wing." Wedge took a sip and asked, "How is the squad holding up?"

"They're shouldering on. Beleddez and Nevil were kind of close, so he's having a rough time. Gavin's been talking to him. He's good with the recruits."

"It doesn't surprise me."

It still seemed like yesterday that the smooth-faced kid from Tatooine walked into Rogue Squadron's barracks, eyes

wide with awe. Despite all the action he'd seen, Gavin Darklighter still possessed a certain youthful quality that made it easy for the new pilots to trust him. He'd make a fine Rogue Leader one day.

Tycho took a drink, felt the whiskey tang on his tongue. He asked, "What would have happened if they hadn't taken down your shields, Wedge? Would you have fought *Reaper*?"

Wedge thought a moment, then said, "Probably not."

It wasn't like Wedge to be skittish. Tycho said, "You're going to have to slug it out with Pellaeon one day. You guys can't just chase each other around the Mid Rim forever."

"I know, but I want to be in a better situation. We were over a hostile planet and our support fleet was still at Qiilura. We'd already killed the World Devastator, and that was our primary goal anyway."

"Fair enough," Tycho said. He had to admit that the two additional Impstars at Tyan had skewed the battle in Pellaeon's favor. "So, does that mean you want to get *Reaper* into a confrontation here?"

Wedge shook his head. "No. I have something else planned."

Tycho perked up. Wedge just stared at him with a tight little smile on his face.

"Out with it," Tycho demanded. "You can't just leave it at that."

"There's a few things." Wedge placed his mug on the tabletop and looked down at his datapad. "For one, fleet command approved my request for more ships."

"About rodding time. What and when?"

"They're set to arrive in five days. Admiral Bell commanding from *Endurance*."

Tycho and Wedge had fought with Areta Bell at Ciutric, but she'd been using the captured Impstar *Swift Liberty* then. "Is that one of those new fleet carriers?"

"The very same. She's fresh off the docks. So are her hangar-full of Model 2 E-wings."

“Hell of a way to break the new ships in. What else?”

“Bell’s coming with a small task force. One more drag ship, plus some Dorneans. Etahn A’baht commanding.”

The name was vaguely familiar. It took Tycho a second to rattle his memory. “A’baht? Is he one of the ones who fought at Endor?”

“The very same. Helped take down Grand Admiral Teshik’s ship.”

“I remember now.” Tycho frowned in thought. The Dorneans had officially joined the New Republic shortly after Thrawn’s death but before the cloned Emperor’s surge. They had a reputation for prickly independence, which was good in rebels but trickier when you were trying to put together a unified galactic government.

“Are they using Dornean ships, or ours?” Tycho asked.

Wedge glanced at his datapad. “One *Nara’tok* class heavy cruiser, two *Braha’tok*-class gunships. Whatever those are.”

The Dorneans, both their ships and their commander, were unknown qualities. So, too, was the new hardware Areta Bell was bringing. Tycho didn’t like so many uncertainties, not when the stakes were so high. He tried to keep the frown from his face.

Wedge, of course, saw through it instantly. “They’re going to be good additions to the fleet, Tycho. We can’t fight the whole campaign with just this juggernaut, we need good support vessels. We also need to surprise Pellaeon.”

“I’m aware of that.”

Like Wedge and the other senior officers, he’d picked over Pellaeon’s career records multiple times. Unlike all the power-grabbing Imp warlords they’d faced, he came across as a genuine Imperial loyalist who wanted to preserve the Empire instead of just grab all the territory he could. He’d had a long career, stretching back to the Clone Wars, and while he wasn’t as tactically brilliant as Thrawn, as audacious as Daala, or as willing to throw away lives as Harrsk, he’d proven to be a highly capable naval officer. He came across as traditional in many ways, but his inventive

use of the cloned Emperor's hardware like the World Devastators and the robotic TIE fighters meant he was creative and adaptable as well.

Tycho placed his mug on the table and folded his arms over his chest. "So *how* are we going to surprise our opposite number, Wedge? With the new help you've got to be planning something. And the Imps have to *know* you'll be planning something. So, what's your move going to be?"

"I've already ordered recon sorties to several systems further up the Entralla route. Corthenia, Lonnaw... and Obreedan."

Tycho thought a moment. "Mining planet, right?"

"Yes. Pellaeon's got two World Devastators pulling everything he can from it right now."

"Tempting target, then. You think the Imps won't figure it out?"

"I'm expecting them to."

"So we *won't* attack Obreedan?"

"Oh, no. We'll attack it."

"A feint, then?"

"Not a feint. We'll take *Lusankya*, *Mon Dromeda*, *Endurance*, the Dorneans. Maybe the whole fleet."

"But you just said the Imps'll be waiting for us."

"They will." Wedge smiled at his confusion. "We'll draw *Reaper* into Obreedan's gravity well. *Mon Dromeda* will fire up her interdiction field and trap the SSD there, but only after we take most of our forces and jump to Orinda."

Tycho blinked. Orinda was just a few hours' jump up the Entralla Route from Obreedan. It had gone back and forth between Imperial and Republic control for years, but Pellaeon had kicked off this campaign by seizing the planet and making it his forward base. According to their intel, it was the current home for *Reaper* and most of Pellaeon's support fleet.

"I'm hoping to force it to surrender quickly," Wedge said.

"If you park this ship in orbit you might convince them," Tycho allowed. "But what about *Mon Dromeda*? Aren't you

basically asking Captain Omphlem to do a suicide mission?"

Wedge shook his head. "Definitely not. Omphlem can park himself far away from *Reaper*, preferably on the far side of the planet. He doesn't need to trap Pellaeon there forever, just a few extra hours."

"Still sounds risky," Tycho hissed.

"I admit that, but it'll give us a chance to take Pellaeon's forward base. If we have Orinda we can cripple his offensive."

"I hope you know what you're doing, General." Tycho tipped his mug in a muted toast.

"Yes," Wedge said, very grave. "Me too."

After the battle at Tyan, Admiral Pellaeon had tasked Captain Dorja to oversee cleanup, including possible salvage of the crashed *Devastator*, then taken both *Death's Head* and *Reaper* back to Orinda.

The planet turned slowly beneath him as he reviewed the after-battle reports in his private cabin. It was three times the size of his personal quarters on *Chimaera* and frankly more spacious than he would have liked. There was a fine line between appropriate privileges of rank and pomposity, and unlike so many other Imperial leaders to emerge out of the wreckage after Endor, he tried very hard to stay on one side of that line.

He glanced out his window at the other ships drifting over the planet. A massive *Altor*-class refueling ship hung off *Reaper's* starboard flank and *Death's Head* was currently grappled to it. Beyond them he recognized the familiar gray wedge of *Chimaera*. He'd tasked his old ship with guarding Orinda throughout the campaign. It was safer here than on the front lines, and while he knew he was being uncharacteristically sentimental, he couldn't help himself.

He'd wondered, more than once, what would have happened if Grand Moff Kaine had allowed Thrawn use of *Reaper* instead of *Chimaera*. Never mind how Pellaeon's

own fate might have changed; the grand admiral could probably have brought the whole rebellion down with a ship this powerful. Granted, brute strength had never been Thrawn's tactical style, but surely he would have come up with some ingenious way to use this super star destroyer against all the firepower the rebels could throw at it.

It was strange to think how opinion had shifted in the years since Thrawn's death. When the alien warlord had ridden out of the Unknown Regions, few Imperial captains had been willing to join the fleet under a non-human commander. Powerful warlords like Kaine, Harrsk, and Delvardus had clung tight to their super star destroyers and deprived Thrawn of a potent flagship. Even some captains who had joined Thrawn did so begrudgingly. Aren Dorja had dragged his feet the whole time and grumbled about leading the fleet himself; now, just a few years after the grand admiral's assassination, Dorja waxed nostalgic about the great leader he'd served.

Such a change was common. Most of the crew who worked under Pellaeon now had belonged to Kaine, Teradoc, and Harrsk's fleets in until their leaders' deaths, but many of them talked about Thrawn with admiration and intimacy, as though they'd stood at his right hand the entire campaign.

As for Pellaeon, he'd never doubted his leader.

Perhaps, he admitted, at the very beginning. While never a fanatic for High Human Culture, Pellaeon had still passively accepted the Empire's prioritization of human interests over aliens'. His own upbringing in the Corellian system, multi-species but highly segregated, had made those policies seem natural. It wasn't until confronted with Thrawn's brilliance that he'd finally realized how the Empire had hampered itself by refusing to allow non-humans in its ranks.

Since taking reins of the Imperial fleet after the fall of Xandel Carivus' Ruling Council a year ago, Pellaeon had made efforts to change that, but predictably, the newly-formed Council of Moffs back on Bastion had dug in its heels to prevent further change.

Pellaeon was old enough to remember when Palpatine's New Order had been a bold revolutionary creation, intent on sweeping away the corruption, sloth, and choking bureaucracy of the Old Republic. It had quickly settled into stubborn conservatism, and even now, after it had been reduced to a pathetic rump state clinging desperately to shrinking sectors in the Mid and Outer Rims, admirals and Moffs alike embraced the pretension that one day they would retake the entire galaxy from the rebel scum and rule from Imperial Center once again.

As much as he tried to fight their delusions, Pellaeon admitted a sympathy for them. The rebellion had shocked them out of the lives they'd known and their response had been to cling to nostalgia for better times. As he watched *Chimaera* drift over Orinda, he could almost remember what it had been like to stand at Thrawn's shoulder and watch the rebellion crumble pathetically before them.

The door to his quarters buzzed. Pellaeon jerked out of his reverie and said, "Enter."

The door slid open. A smile spread under his gray mustache as Colonel Reige stepped through.

"Ready for your briefing, sir?" Reige snapped a salute.

"Oh, sit down, Molgarin, don't be formal." Pellaeon waved a hand.

The years since Endor had changed everyone, but they'd changed Molgarin Reige more than anyone. When she'd first come aboard *Chimaera* almost ten years ago she'd been a driven young woman intent on making the most of her career in Imperial service. She'd climbed plenty of ranks since then, but her ardor had given way to a certain grim weariness. Heavy lines had settled on her face and beneath her eyes; a few streaks of gray even ran through her hair despite the fact that she wasn't yet forty.

She was, nonetheless, a handsome woman. After Endor she'd been reassigned to a frigate that had lost her commanding officer, and for a few months Pellaeon had enjoyed an intimate relationship with his former subordinate

and fellow captain. They'd provided each other with some solace and stability in the whirlwind of an Empire without and Emperor, but in the end duty had assigned them opposite sides of the galaxy. Pellaeon had tried to cling to relationships in turbulent times before and learned his lesson painfully; he and Reige had agreed to part amicably, and after that he'd done the best to put the woman from his mind, all the while missing her companionship.

He'd gone three years without seeing Reige; when fate put them together again she had a small child with her, a little over two years old. She'd never volunteered the name of Vitor's father and he'd never asked; three years of turbulence was a long time and it had changed them both.

Even as he'd tried to put their personal relationship aside, Pellaeon had come to value Reige's professional skills. She had an agile and creative mind, and that was exactly what the Empire needed right now. It was why he'd assigned Reige the task of managing all naval intelligence operations for the campaign.

She'd been doing a fine job of that. On some small level, too, Pellaeon was glad they'd settled into a good working relationship. It was better than becoming estranged. It was better than what had happened with Hallena.

"It's good to see you're in one piece, Gilad," the colonel said as she lowered herself into the soft chair across from Pellaeon.

"I had nothing to worry about," Pellaeon waved a hand. "*Reaper* didn't even see action at Tyan."

"I'm surprised Antilles ran before you could fight."

"I'm not. The One-Eighty-First took out his bridge shields. He didn't want to end up like poor old Piett."

"Phennir does get results," Reige allowed.

She knew that Pellaeon had never been entirely comfortable with the 181st's commander. Phennir lacked the realism of his mentor Soontir Fel, and had taken the 181st from the service of one power-mad warlord to another in the hopes of rebuilding a strong new Empire out of any of

them. He'd refused to serve under Thrawn and had only come under Pellaeon's banner because all the other warlords had been exterminated in one swift stroke by Natasi Daala after the cloned Emperor's death.

Pellaeon settled back in his chair and asked, "Well, Molgarin, what do you have to report?"

Reige placed her datapad in her lap. "Several things. We've picked up intrusions by rebel scouting craft in several systems within the past twelve hours."

It wasn't surprising. Despite failing to take Tyan, they'd dealt the Empire a blow there with minimal loss to themselves. Pellaeon knew Antilles would be planning another attack.

"What systems?" he asked.

"Mostly on the Entralla Route. Corthenia, Lonnaw, and Centrax."

"Obreedan?"

"Not that we've noticed."

"I'm surprised you picked up that many. Normally the rebels know how to sneak around."

"Normally they insert reconnaissance ships on the edges of systems and do passive scans. Those three all dipped close to the systems' primary planets."

"But nothing on Obreedan?"

"Nothing we've seen."

Obreedan was by far the most tempting target of that lot, especially if Antilles was set on avoiding a confrontation with *Reaper*. Two World Devastators were currently pulling resources out of the planet and forging them into TIE/d fighters, I-7 Howlrunners, and other vital war material. Though only a few hours via hyperspace from Orinda, the planet was being guarded by only one star destroyer.

"If he's trying to convince us he *won't* attack Obreedan," Pellaeon said, "He's not doing a very good job."

"Do you want to send reinforcements?"

Pellaeon sunk deeper into his chair. Antilles was more devious than he seemed at first glance. Despite helming

Lusankya, he still thought like a starfighter pilot. His attacks were fast and precise, and he never offered the enemy too long a look at him.

Pellaeon glanced out the window at the refueling ship. "We'll relocate *Death's Head*."

"Is that all?" Reige frowned. "Shouldn't we at least put the Orinda fleet on standby alert?"

Instead of answering, Pellaeon asked, "What about *Dominion* and *Megador*?"

Reige blinked at the change of topic, then said, "We have no indication the rebels know about either ship."

"Any indication they've been looking?"

"All their scout ships and intel probes have been focused in this part of space."

Pellaeon nodded gratefully. Used to smaller ships, he'd been uncomfortable taking command of *Reaper* after he'd inherited the ship from Grand Moff Kaine, but it had the excellent asset of drawing attention like a magnet. In that sense the super star destroyer was like the World Devastators now devouring uninhabited portions of occupied worlds.

It made the Devastators useful in a second way. The rebels were so concerned with tracking and defeating those war machines that they'd so far missed the other spoils Pellaeon had inherited from his predecessors.

The Deep Core bases had provided one surprise after another. After executing all of the warlords, Daala had claimed Sander Delvardus' *Night Hammer*, which would have made a fine twin to *Reaper* had it not been destroyed by Jedi sabotage at Yavin. Officers defecting from the late Blitzler Harrsk's forces had led Pellaeon to even more hidden treasures. At the Deep 3 shipyards he'd found the waiting bulks of *Megador*, *Dominion*, and Harrsk's original flagship, *Illthmar's Fist*. One super star destroyer was a great find in itself; three was a miracle.

Illthmar's Fist, an old *Praetor II*-class cruiser, had been battered beyond repair, and Pellaeon had ordered it scrapped.

Its pieces had gone to repairing the other two vessels. *Dominion* was a handsome *Bellator*-class destroyer, some four times the length of the standard Imperial star destroyer. *Megador*, even better, was a nineteen-kilometer *Vengeance*-class.

Records were sketchy but it appeared to have been the only one of its kind still alive. The original vessel, High Inquisitor Jerec's long black sword, had found its way to Byss after Jerec's death and reportedly been destroyed with the planet. The second of its type, *Javelin*, had been lost during Imperial infighting at Chasin. *Megador* would have died with *Vengeance* if Harrsk hadn't commandeered it at the last moment and jumped away from Byss world right before its destructive shock-wave annihilated the rest of the fleet there.

Once refits were complete, Pellaeon had moved both behemoths to the Outer Rim as quietly as possible and ordered them kept there until needed.

His gut told him the time would come soon.

"Gilad?" Reige frowned. "What is it?"

"Antilles will attack Obreedan," Pellaeon allowed, "But he's got something else planned too."

"I'm not sure yet, but we need to be ready."

"Do you want to move either of the other super star destroyers?"

"We should be prepared." Pellaeon tapped the arm of his chair. "Molgarin, let's go the the bridge. I want to send a message."

"To whom?" Reige said as she rose from her chair.

Pellaeon thought for a moment. A super star destroyer was a very tempting piece of hardware for an ambitious Imperial admiral, and he'd left *Megador* and *Dominion* in the hands of officers he could trust.

"I think I want to talk to *Dominion*," he said. Admiral Teren Rogriss had proven his loyalty before, battling rebels and warlords alike. The man was durable and professional but also a quick thinker, willing to improvise when needed.

“Yes,” Pellaeon muttered, “I think Admiral Rogriss will be just what we need...”

General Etahn A’baht had lived the vast majority of his life in Dornean Space, and he still wasn’t used to how damned *big* the rest of the galaxy was.

Just preparing for this journey to Antilles’ staging area at Qiilura had required multiple voyages to other planets, and many of those had been hyperspace journeys of several days. His modest three-ship task force had first gone to Mon Calamari (thankfully not far from Dornea), then taken the long plunge all the way to the Core (a very long trip) where he was personally briefed on the mission at Anaxes by Republic fleet command. After being lectured on cooperation and discipline by craggy old luminaries like Ackbar, Nantz, Dodonna, and Tallon, he’d taken his ships out to Corellia, where he’d met up with Areta Bell for the first time and got a tour of her new vessel, the fleet carrier *Endurance*.

At around a kilometer long, a third bigger than his own command ship *Charnak*, it had plenty of room for brand-new E-wing interceptors and K-wing heavy bombers. All those polished, sparkling new fighters would have been an encouraging sight, but the entire ship smelled like shoe-polish too. Admiral Bell didn’t seem to mind, but A’baht would have preferred a ship that had been broken in.

Thankfully, he had just that with *Charnak*.

Finally, at long last, Bell and A’baht had joined their fleets and set out for Qiilura. All in all, the whole process took almost two weeks. A’baht hopes Antilles’ need for reinforcements wasn’t urgent.

Despite the long, long wait, there was still work to be done on *Charnak*. A’baht had ordered the entire ship be ready for combat the moment they dropped into the staging zone at Qiilura. He went on regular foot patrols, walking his ship from bow to stern and back again, checking and double-checking with the section crews.

He especially spent time in the hangar bay. *Charnak* was no carrier, and had less starfighter capacity than a comparable Republic or Imperial ship. The Dorneans had never manufactured snubfighters of their own and had traditionally bought them from third-parties. At Corellia, the Republic had restocked *Charnak*'s fighter bay with new but unfamiliar ships, and his pilots had had only limited time to adjust to the new X-wings and A-wings. The fighter pilots did their best in the simulators, but A'baht could tell they still longed for the old T-wings and Y-wings now stuffed to the back of *Charnak*'s hangar.

During the outbound trip he spent minimal time on the bridge. It was the opposite of his usual habit, but for once he had no reason to be up there. The long plow through hyperspace required minimal crew, and he trusted *Charnak*'s captain to command them effectively.

When he'd introduced Captain Jadesei Kaeori to Admiral Bell, the older woman had been visibly surprised. A'baht had explained that Kaeori was part of a group of humans who'd found shelter on Dornea after her homeworld was ravaged by the Empire. Bell had accepted that, but still seemed confused as to how one human could so easily command a shipful of aliens.

A'baht had been rather amused by her consternation, and he knew Kaeori had been too.

At the end of their second day outbound, as the ship lowered its internal lights and switched to its sleeping period, A'baht ventured up to the bridge to check on Kaeori. He found the young woman standing near the forward viewport, watching hyperspace whip past.

"It's time for rest, Captain," he reminded her.

She jerked slightly, surprised by his arrival, but she didn't look away from the hypnotic light-show ahead. "I'll stay for a little longer, sir."

"You need to be well-rested when we hit Qiilura. I want everything on this ship- people and equipment- to be at peak operation. Is that understood?"

Kaeori nodded slightly. "Of course, sir. I won't disappoint."

He didn't doubt that. Kaeori had served loyally under him since before Endor. Most of the Bavinyari refugees in Dornean space had returned to their homeworld to repopulate it now that the Empire was gone, but Kaeori and a handful of others had remained.

He knew why, even though neither he nor she had ever said it aloud. Every human who'd stayed and kept fighting did so for the same reason. They all wanted to hurt the Empire. They all wanted to repay personal losses. He'd never asked the specifics from his officer, but he knew she had no family left, only the fight.

A'baht observed the tightness on Kaeori's face, the tension. He said, "The Imperials aren't going anywhere, Captain. There will be plenty to kill when we arrive."

She nodded just a little but said no more. A'baht restrained a sigh and walked away, knowing she would be up there for a long time yet.

"It's a dangerous game you're playing," Turr Phennir said.

Admiral Pellaeon stared at him from across the table. *Reaper* hummed faintly around them as they sat in the briefing room.

"It's a dangerous battle we're fighting," Pellaeon agreed. "But sometimes we have to take risks."

"And what if the rebels' main goal *is* to take Obreedan?"

"Then we have several options. If necessary, we can call *Dominion* in to assist us there."

"Assuming they don't have an interdiction field up."

"Assuming. The other choice is to send Rogriss to Qiilura. If they move the bulk of their fleet to Obreedan, their staging point should be undefended."

"Qiilura isn't Obreedan, or Orinda. It's sparsely populated. It doesn't have useful resources."

"Nonetheless, we could cut the enemy off in the Entralla Route."

“You want to force a confrontation with *Lusankya*?”

“Antilles wants one with *Reaper*. We’re just trying to maneuver it so the showdown is favorable to our own sides.”

“All right,” Phennir said, “Where do you want the One-Eighty-First to be in all this?”

“I want the rebels to think we’re putting our lot in at Obreedan. I want your whole wing there. There should be facilities on the planet to house your ships.”

“Not aboard *Death’s Head*?”

“Captain Harbid already has a full complement. Besides, if you’re down on the planet, you’re more likely to attract the attention of whatever spies the rebels have secreted into the civilian population. You’ll make the trap more convincing.”

It was a good enough plan, and more ruthless than he expected from Pellaeon, but Phennir didn’t like being bait. “What happens if the rebels don’t attack Obreedan at all?”

“They will,” the admiral said confidently. “The only question is where *else* they attack, and with what vessels.”

Death’s Head was joining *Nemesis* at Obreedan, another Imperial-class ship. Even with two World Devastators and their droid fighter swarms, that wasn’t enough to defend a planet against *Lusankya*. The fight at Tyan was proof enough of that.

“Where will you keep *Reaper*?” he asked.

“She’ll be waiting between Orinda and Obreedan.”

“And *Dominion*?”

Pellaeon gave nothing away, but Phennir hadn’t really expected him to anyway.

“All right,” said Phennir, “We’ll head for Obreedan. If *Lusankya* does show up, sir, I promise we’ll give it another good drubbing until you come.”

“That’s all I ask,” Pellaeon smiled politely. “Give my compliments to that pilot of yours who took out *Lusankya*’s bridge shields. I saw the recording from your gun-camera, Colonel. It was very impressive.”

"I'll be sure to pass it on to Lieutenant Devis, sir."

Pellaeon frowned. "Devis, you said?"

"Yes, sir, Mynar Devis. He's the new leader of Red Squadron after we lost Lieutenant Hannik at Orocco."

Pellaeon's eyes went distant, as though something far away had suddenly stolen his attention. Whatever else could be said about the old warhorse, Pellaeon usually kept his focus on the matter at hand. Phennir asked, "Are you all right, Admiral?"

Pellaeon's eyes jerked back to Phennir. He gave two jagged nods before he managed to say, "Quite all right, Colonel, thank you. Yes, give my regards to Mynar Devis."

Phennir snapped a salute, turned, and marched out of the room. He found he was very glad to be out of there.

Reaper was the most impressive ship Phennir had ever served on, but she still had her drawbacks. For one, it took a very long time to get anywhere. Pellaeon's meeting room was near the bridge and the 181st ready rooms were near the main hangar deck, almost eight kilometers away. Even using the fast railcars that ran regularly back and forth from bow to stern, it still took nearly fifteen minutes to get back where he belonged.

Phennir had heard from Baron Fel how slovenly the 181st had been under Derricote, back when it was one of the Empire's worst units instead of its best. Fel knew that discipline in the cockpit began with discipline in the ready room, and Phennir had done his best to carry on that policy. Whatever else could be said about Baron Fel, the man had known how to run a starfighter wing.

Nonetheless, his pilots were human, and they deserved to enjoy themselves between missions, so he wasn't surprised to be greeted by the whiff of alcohol and the chatter of many voices. When he entered the noise died down; he could feel over a dozen eyes on fall on him at once.

Phennir gave the ready-room a quick lookover. He spotted two pilots slouching in the booth at the back, and another half-dozen clustered around a sabacc table. Then he spotted

the ones he was looking for: all four squad leaders, gathered in a booth in the far corner of the room, splitting a bottle.

Phennir didn't say anything to the other pilots. If he told them they were at ease they'd start getting loud and rowdy again, and he liked the fact that his presence automatically brought discipline to his subordinates.

As Phennir grabbed a chair and seated himself at the end of the booth, Green Squad's Lieutenant Belkaron asked, "Did you get back from talking with Pellaeon, sir?"

"That's right." Phennir said.

He glanced around the booth. Belkaron sat in the right corner, Blue Squad's Seth Avrian in the left. Avrian had his sandy-brown hair clipped short but Belkaron had let his black locks grow unruly. Between Phennir and Belkaron was Ayyra Cyrillian, the 181st's highest-ranking female officer and Gold Squad's leader. She was young and small, and dark brown hair fell in curls on either side of her round tanned face. Finally, next to Avrian, was Red Squad's Mynar Devis, apparently the admiral's new favorite. Devis looked at his commander with an alcohol-happy smile slanting white across his light brown face.

Avrian and Cyrillian were good, by-the-book soldiers. Belkaron and Devis both had reckless streaks, but they were also some of the best pilots he'd ever seen in a long career. Phennir had made certain all four of them earned their rank before giving it to them.

"The admiral has given us a new assignment," Phennir said, knowing they'd pass it down to their squads.

"Are we leaving Orinda, sir?" Avrian asked.

Phennir nodded. Belkaron blew out a breath and said, "Shame. We just got here too."

"We're being reassigned to Obreedan," Phennir told them. "They're making space for us at the main ground base now."

He could see the confusion on their faces. Thus far they'd been based solely on star destroyers. Phennir knew the destroyer captains didn't like it because it required too much

reshuffling of their own TIEs, but the 181st was an elite unit and therefore a mobile one.

With a lowered voice, Cyrillian asked, "Are the rebels coming to Obreedan?"

"Pellaeon suspects as much," Phennir said. He wouldn't tell them the rest but he wouldn't lie to his troops either. Baron Fel never had.

"They're going after more Devastators," Cyrillian stated, rather than asked.

"You'd think those things could just pump out all the droid fighters they need," Belkaron said.

"They're pumping out other things too, you know," Devis reminded him.

"Hey, I don't mind." Belkaron grinned a little. "I can't wait to face Rogue Squadron again."

The other three nodded eagerly. They didn't have Wedge Antilles to lead them any more but the squadron was still a great danger. They'd lost several pilots to the Rogues already and had yet to kill any of those rebels themselves.

"I'm glad," Phennir said honestly. "But right now, don't think about the Rogues, think about getting ready. We leave for Obreedan in nine hours."

He could see it on their faces: *So soon?* To their credit, none of them asked it aloud. As Phennir rose from his chair he looked at Devis and said, "The admiral wants to relay his personal congratulations for your maneuver at Tyan."

Belkaron clapped. Cyrillian and Avrian nodded, impressed. As for Devis, he leaned back against the booth-cushions and gave them a proud silent grin.

"Don't get cocky," Phennir reminded him, "And don't disobey direct orders again."

"Won't happen, sir, I promise," Devis said. He probably didn't believe it any more than Phennir did.

Before Endor a man like Devis' behavior would have gotten him stuck as XO of a mediocre TIE interceptor squad. Now he was a lieutenant in the 181st, and the worst part was, he really was the best fit for the job.

Pellaeon talked about how the Empire had to adapt. Phennir understand that, even if he didn't like it. Without another word, he turned and walked out of the ready room. He paused for a moment after stepping through the door and listened. Instead of a resumed cacophony, he heard the four squad leaders call their people to attention.

Feeling a little better, Phennir walked on.

When they arrived at Qiilura, A'baht and Admiral Bell were immediately called over to *Lusankya* for a conference with General Antilles. Before getting in his shuttle, A'baht told Captain Kaeori to keep the crew on yellow alert. She eagerly complied.

As his shuttle approached the massive super star destroyer, A'baht felt something heavy settle into his gut. He'd only seen *Executor* from afar at Endor, and he'd never expected to get to see another ship of her class up close, much less a friendly one with red New Republic crests painted on her hull. He'd spent his whole life fighting a tiny war against a much bigger foe. It felt fundamentally strange that something so huge and deadly should also be friendly.

The shuttles from *Endurance* and *Charnak* arrived in the bay at the same time, and an honor guard led both A'baht and Admiral Bell into the transit tube that whisked them eight kilometers down toward the massive vessel's stern. They said little on the way there. A'baht could read humans better than most of his race and he could see tension in the gray-haired woman's face. It dug lines around her mouth and crinkled her eyes.

Their escorts led them to a conference room. A long table stretched out before them, and the viewport on the far end looked down on the snowy surface of Qiilura.

Standing in front of the viewport was General Wedge Antilles. A'baht had never met the man but he'd seen plenty of holos. Usually Antilles had been wearing a crumpled orange flight suit, and his dark hair had been matted against his forehead by some freshly-removed flight helmet. The

man before him now was in a crisp uniform, as professional and slick as a senior fleet officer was expected to be.

A'baht and Bell took seats next to each other on Antilles' right right. On his left, one sandy-haired human, one brown-skinned Mon Calamari, and another human, older, with gray hair cropped short. Antilles introduced them as Tycho Celchu of Rogue Squadron, Captain Omphlem of the interdictor *Mon Dromeda*, and Captain Carson of the star destroyer *Yakez*.

Once introductions were out of the way, Antilles got on with his plan. A'baht had heard none of it, and from the veiled shock on her face, neither had Admiral Bell.

"General Antilles," the woman said once he was done, "This plan depends on a number of big assumptions."

Antilles folded his hands in front of him on the tabletop. "They're not as big as you'd think, Admiral. The pivotal question here is whether Pellaeon will bring *Reaper* to defend Obreedan. I'm certain he will."

"Certain *how*?" asked A'baht.

"It's simple. He can't afford to lose Obreedan. He's got two World Devastators down there, tearing up the planet. If he loses it, he loses a critical source of supplies for his war machine. Remember, this isn't the Empire of old. They're more strapped for matériel than we are. They can't afford to give it away so easily."

"He may realize the choice you're forcing him to make," Bell warned. "He may decide Orinda is more important than Obreedan."

Antilles shook his head. "He has more ships massed at Orinda, and more people on the ground, but he simply can't afford to lose Obreedan."

"What happens if Pellaeon brings his whole fleet there?" asked A'baht. "Do we stay and fight there, or do we still jump to Orinda?"

"Orinda is the primary target," Antilles said firmly.

A'baht could see he wouldn't get any farther with this line of questioning. Switching tack, he asked, "What happens

when *Reaper* jumps to Obreedan? How can we be sure we can trap him in the interdiction field but not our own ships?"

Captain Omphlem said, "We can expect Pellaeon to arrive on a vector from Orinda. *Mon Dromeda* will position herself on the opposite side of the planet and use it as cover for as long as possible."

Antilles added, "Admiral Bell, I want your drag ship place opposite from *Mon Dromeda*, just in case."

Bell frowned. "Right in *Reaper*'s entrance vector?"

"It's risky, I know, but if Pellaeon jumps in from someplace else, your ship might be the one to keep him stuck at Obreedan instead."

Bell looked unhappy, but nodded.

"What kind of defenses does Obreedan have at the moment?" asked Carson.

"We sent a prowler through the system just three hours ago. They have two Impstars, plus two Devastators eating up the planet surface. The good thing we learned from Tyan is that a concentrated bombardment from *Lusankya* should be enough to bring a Devastator down from orbit."

"We want to keep our smaller capital ships as far away from those monsters as possible," Celchu added.

"All right," Bell said, "I have one last question, General."

Antilles nodded.

"Whether at Obreedan or Orinda, it's almost certain *Lusankya* is going to have to face *Reaper*. How do you plan on winning that fight?"

"It's going to depend on several things. First, I'm going to rely on *Yakez*, *Charnak*, and the other heavy warships to keep the Impstars busy. More important, though, is your ship."

Bell nodded, like she'd been expecting that. "We're loaded up with E-wings and K-wings. They're ready for a pinpoint strike on your order."

"That's what I need, Admiral. Keep *Endurance* close to *Lusankya* for as long as you can. We'll do our best to protect your ship if things get hairy, but ultimately, we're

going to need your fighters to launch a killing blow on *Reaper*."

A'baht glanced at Bell. She'd probably been expecting something like this. The severe lines on her face seemed to deepen.

"When do we leave, General?" she asked.

Antilles glanced at his wrist chronometer. "Four standard hours, thirty minutes."

"Then we'd best get our ships ready."

"That's right." Antilles stood, signaling the end of the meeting. "Good hunting, all of you."

It was the kind of farewell a fighter pilot would give. Bell and A'baht were quickest out the door, and they grabbed the same shuttle back to the hangar bay.

As it whisked them along, A'baht leaned close to Bell and said, "I have to admit, Admiral, I'm a little uncertain as to the role my ships are going to be playing in this."

"Antilles has never fought with you before. None of us have. You're an unknown quality." Bell said it without apology. He respected that.

"You've fought with him before, though."

"Yes, but he wasn't a commander then, just a pilot."

"There's a big difference between an X-wing and *Lusankya*."

"There's also a big difference between and X-wing and our new E-wings. I'm not sure the general understands that." Bell's lips pressed tight together.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean those E-wings are designed for fast, tactical strikes. They're not as versatile as X-wings. As for the K-wings, they can break a hole in *Reaper* if they get a chance, but they need fighter cover."

"I'm sure he understands that. General Antilles doesn't just know X-wings."

Bell made a noise in the back of her throat but didn't say anything. The shuttle swept along and A'baht didn't say anything else. When he reached the hangar bay and left for

Charnak, he was glad to be back on his own ship. For all its power, *Lusankya* had failed to imbue him with confidence in the coming battle.

Tycho and Wedge lingered in the conference room after the captains had left for their ships. An awkward silence lingered between them until Tycho asked, "Do you think Admiral Bell will be a problem?"

"A problem? She has more command experience than I do."

"That's what I mean."

He ran a hand through his dark hair and looked at the tabletop. "I trust that she knows her ship better than I do. So I'll give her range enough to deploy when and how she wants to."

That sounded risky to Tycho, but he knew his friend was still thinking like a fighter pilot, trusting in individual intuition and fast, well-placed strikes. That worked well for Rogue Squadron, but for a tightly-planned, high-stakes battle like this, he wasn't sure how it would play.

"What about A'baht?" he asked. "What do you think of him?"

Wedge thought for a moment. "A little like Bell, actually." Tycho hadn't expected that. "In what way?"

"They're both veteran commanders, but they're used to doing things certain ways. A'baht especially. He fought most of the war on his own."

"Can we trust him to follow orders?"

"Ackbar vouches for him. Says he was critical in capturing Teshik at Endor."

"So you trust Ackbar."

"Trust is essential in any fighting unit. I trust A'baht and Bell. I have to trust them, just like you trust Hobbie and Gavin."

Tycho had known his flight leaders for years; he knew how they flew, how they made decisions. He couldn't say the same for A'baht and Bell and neither could Wedge.

Before the silence could grow too thick, Wedge asked, "Have you sent a message to Winter?"

Tycho blinked, jerked from one train of thought to another. Then he said, "Yes. I wrote it before we came here, actually. Sent it off on the last packet to the relay station at Ord Mantell." After a pause, he added, "It wasn't one of those, I-love-you-but-I'm-about-to-die letters. I tried to make it as straightforward as possible. I didn't mention much about the mission."

"When was the last time you talked to her on HoloNet?"

"It's been a while," Tycho admitted. "But we've been used to having a... sporadic relationship."

That was putting it mildly. Since they'd first met during a Rogue Squadron mission shortly after Endor, Tycho and Winter had been pulled apart and put together again so many times he was starting to lose count. Even now she was splitting her time between running intel missions for NRI and watching over the Solo children. Tycho tried to tell himself that most other relationships could never have lasted through so much outside drama, that he and Winter were bound together by the homeworld they'd lost and by a shared determination not to let any lesser calamity break them apart.

Telling himself that helped a little, but it wasn't much without Winter by his side.

It was a maudlin line of thought and he tried not to dwell on it. He asked Wedge, "What about Qwi?"

"I sent a message too," Wedge allowed.

"What about talking?"

"It's been a few months."

"Well. We've been busy."

"You've got that right."

Wedge looked down at the table. Tycho didn't know what else to add. He'd never been comfortable with Wedge's romance with Qwi Xux. The Omwati may not have known she was helping Tarkin design his Death Star, but she'd helped all the same, and Tycho had never totally been able

to separate that fragile, naive woman with the destruction of his home and family.

He imagined that Qwi's innocence must have been one of the things that had drawn Wedge toward her; she'd offered a definite break from the life of grueling, unending combat he'd known since joining the rebels over a decade ago.

Still, to Tycho it had always seemed like a match that couldn't endure. He'd thought for years that Wedge would have been better off with Iella Wessiri from NRI. Partly it was his own proclivity for lady spies rubbing off, but there were times when he'd been sure he'd spotted mutual interest between his two friends.

"I don't think she really understands," Wedge muttered, half to himself. "What we do out here. What this war's been like for us all."

"She's lucky she doesn't," Tycho said truthfully.

"I know. But sometimes it seems like there's this disconnect..." Wedge trailed off, shook his head. "This isn't the time to be talking about women, is it?"

"Definitely not." Tycho slapped a hand on his friend's shoulder. "I've got to get down to the hangar bay and muster the Rogues."

"And I've got to do pre-flight checks," Wedge nodded. He put a hand on Tycho's shoulder and squeezed it hard. "Keep 'em safe."

"I should be telling you that, General."

"Fair enough. How about 'I hope you shoot down lots of TIEs with red paint slapped on.'?"

"Much better," Wedge grinned. "And I hope you take down a super star destroyer *without* red paint."

"That'd be a great day all around. Come on, Tycho. We've got work to do."

The blue holo-image of Teren Rogriss flickered in the darkness of Pellaeon's personal cabin. Pellaeon stood in front of his desk, looking down at the other admiral's square face and squared soldiers.

"You're to stand by at those coordinates until further notice," Pellaeon told him.

Rogriss nodded. "Understood, sir."

"Once you get my initial signal that the fight's begun, put all your task force on red alert, but do not take further action until you hear from me personally."

"Yes, sir." Rogriss nodded again. Unlike Phennir, he'd taken his instructions without question.

"Very good. You'll be hearing from me again, likely in the near future."

"I look forward to it, sir."

Rogriss' shrunken holo-image snapped a salute. Then Pellaeon reached out and flicked off the holo, plunging his bedroom into darkness.

He sighed, stepped up to the small viewport, and pressed his fingers against the cool transparisteel. *Reaper* had turned her flank away from Orinda; all he could see were stars. He wondered where they were in the planet's orbit, what direction they were facing. He wondered if one of those faint twinkling lights was Obreedan or Qiilura. But of course, it didn't really matter.

The 181st had relocated to Obreedan. So had *Death's Head*, joining *Nemesis* already stationed there. Aside from *Reaper*, Orinda itself as still protected by *Chimaera*, *Stormhawk*, *Right to Rule*, and the massive old *Secutor*-class fleet carrier *Rampart*. Dorja still kept *Relentless* at Tyan, and Captain Brandei's *Judicator* watched over the HoloNet transceiver at Urce. He'd warned both captains that their services may be required soon and left it at that.

All the pieces were in place. The only thing left was to wait for Antilles to make his move.

Pellaeon hated waiting. The darkness and silence swelled around him. The possibilities awoken by his last conversation with Phennir oppressed him. He'd acted the good admiral since then, giving orders, making battle plans, but in the end, once everything was done, Mynar Devis was waiting to be faced.

Pellaeon sat down at his desk and started up his personal datapad. Its dim white light bathed his face as he called up the military records for all personnel currently in Imperial service. Given the chaos the Empire had been through, the list was half-complete at best, but he was sure all members of the elite 181st would have been properly documented.

He found himself staring at the flat glowing headshot image of Mynar Devis. He had a narrow face, tanned but not as dark as his mother's. He tried to pick out certain features that echoed Hallena's or his own, but the picture was too small to tell anything for certain.

The galaxy was full of beings named 'Devis.' 'Mynar' was not an uncommon name either. The combination, however, could not have been a coincidence.

Pellaeon scrolled through Devis' biographical information. It wasn't much; the Empire's record-keeping was far from what it used to be. It did, however, list his date of entry to the Presbelt military academy, shortly before the Battle of Yavin, plus his honors, his graduation date, and the assignments he'd had as part of Arduus Kaine's Pentastar Alignment.

Kaine had been smarter than the other warlords and avoided direct conflict with either the Republic or other ex-Imperials, which was the reason why his *Reaper* outlived most other ships of its class, not that it had saved Kaine himself from rebel assassins once all the other warlords had been cleared out. Kaine had forged his mini-empire out of the sectors he'd controlled as Grand Moff, which meant Mynar had probably grown up in the Outer Rim somewhere.

Pellaeon tired to find biographical information on Mynar's early life. All he found, at the very end, was a date and place of birth. Phaeda, twenty-nine years ago. The date fit. He had no idea where Hallena had gone after she'd left his life in ruin almost thirty years back, but Phaeda was as good a place as any a woman would go to hide from her past.

There was no information about Mynar's parents. Nothing about siblings or half-siblings. He'd simply been born, and

seventeen years later he'd joined the Academy and begun the path that had led him here, to his father's ship.

Pellaeon slumped back in his chair. It was impossible. It was inevitable. Hallena could have had a son by another man. Their last meeting had been passionate but brief, and they'd hardly parted on good terms. He'd spent the thirty years since trying to forget their last encounter, and forget the woman who'd been the sole light in the life of a young captain slogging through the Clone Wars, totally ignorant of where his life would lead him.

Sometimes a man needed willfull ignorance to avoid distractions that might get him killed. It was why he'd never made an inquiry into the parentage of Molgarin Reige's boy.

Pellaeon scrolled back up to the top of Mynar's entry and looked at the photo again. Yes, he could see a little of Hallena. The large eyes and long squared-off chin. The cheekbones seemed lower, more like Pellaeon's own, but it was so hard to tell.

The only way to know for sure would be to call Mynar Devis into his office and talk to the man himself.

Assuming Devis survived the coming battle.

Pellaeon shuddered in the dark. It would be the ultimate cruelty to discover his son then lose him, even worse than rediscovering Hallena right before losing her the way he had.

It was absurd that this surprise had been thrown at him now, on the eve of a battle that could make or break his attempt to forge a coherent Imperial polity again after the Empire had been fractured by so many ambitious warlords. Throughout his career he'd always prioritized his duty over his personal needs; the last time he'd done otherwise had been his last encounter with Hallena, and it had taught him a lesson he could never forget.

Yet here was this boy, this man, staring at him from the flat screen of his datapad, an undeniable fact as solid and as dangerous as any mission *Lusankya* could throw at him.

He reached out, found the datapad's power switch, and turned it off.

The white screen blacked out. He sat back in his chair, in the dark, and watched faint stars drift by outside his window. He knew they would bring no peace.

When *Charnak* and the Republic fleet flashed into realspace over Obreedan, Captain Kaeori immediately called for a tactical survey. Standing at the front of the bridge, looking dead ahead at the planet, General A'baht listened as the report confirmed what his eyes told him: Two *Imperial*-class star destroyers in orbit. Scans of the surface noted the presence of two World Devastators hovering over the surface of the planet on its southern hemisphere.

So far, so good.

"Launch two squads of those new fighters," A'baht told Kaeori. "Let our pilots get a test-run in but hold back from full engagement."

"Understood," Kaeori nodded from the tactical station.

A'baht watched as the tactical holo sprang up. The map was not to scale, and the large marker for *Lusankya* did no justice the behemoth's massive size. Its double-sized green diamond in the middle of the larger fleet.

As *Charnak* launched her new A-wings, *Lusankya* and *Yakez* sent out their own fighter wings to meet the I-7 Howlrunners and TIE/In fighters spilling out of destroyers. Meanwhile, the two interdictors spread out to opposite poles of the planet's gravity well, each one escorted by one of the nimble little DP20 anti-starfighter gunships.

It was all a show, but it had to look real enough to draw *Reaper* into the fight. That meant they had to attempt to destroy the two World Devastators on the surface. A'baht checked the scanners; neither monstrosity seemed to be rising out of the atmosphere as the Devastator at Tyan reportedly had. Apparently, the Imperials had learned their lesson from that battle and were keeping their war machines as far away from *Lusankya*'s heavy guns as possible.

"General," Kaeori called from the tactical station, "We're getting a request from *Lusankya*. They want us to move into

lower orbit and begin orbital bombardment of the Devastators.”

A’baht suppressed a frown. “Is anyone else being sent forward?”

“*Yakez* will assist.”

Carson’s Impstar was sure to have guns capable of a heavy surface attack, even if they weren’t on *Lusankya*’s level. Antilles’ reasoning was obvious; he didn’t want to draw his flagship into lower orbit, lest it get trapped there and fail to make the quick jump to Orinda.

Yakez and *Charnak* were more expendable.

“General, should we comply?” Kaeori asked. She didn’t seem pleased with the order either.

“We have our orders,” he told her. “Let’s trash some Imperial hardware.”

That seemed to encourage Kaeori a little bit. She relayed his orders.

A’baht turned back to the viewport and watched the planet swell beneath them. He couldn’t make out the Devastators on the surface, but *Yakez*’s pointed off-white bow was edging into view, as were her starfighters and modified blastboat scout ships.

“General,” the comm officer called, “We just got a message from Colonel Celchu of Rogue Squadron. He says they’re taking point.”

A’baht watched as a long formation of X-wing fighters raced past *Charnak* and plunged toward the planet. They were enough to make him a little more confident about the fight ahead.

Tycho’s X-wing rocked around him and his starfighter plunged into Obreedan’s atmosphere. Friction-fed flame lashed up from his fighter’s nose and licked across his cockpit.

He switched his comlink to Rogue Squadron’s team frequency and said, “How are we holding up?”

“Flight’s holding steady, Lead,” Gavin reported.

"Not dead yet," Hobbie added.

It was a good enough start. The flare of entry died as quickly as it had come, and his vision was filled with fat white clouds hovered above a landscape of mottled greens and browns.

Tycho switched frequencies. "Spotter One, you there?"

"Right behind you, Rouge Leader."

"Where are those Devastators?"

"Feeding telemetry to you now."

"Thanks," Tycho said. The directional readout appeared on his scanner and he switched back to Rogue Squadron's frequency. "Okay people, follow my lead. We're going after a Devastator."

His flight leaders clicked affirmation as they plunged through the upper cloud layer. The goal at Obreedan wasn't to destroy the Devastators but to make it look like they were trying very hard. That put the lives of the Rogues and a lot of others at risk, but it was the only way to ensure Wedge's plan of trapping *Reaper*.

The planet's surface spread before them: a broad semi-arid landscape of brown hills topped with dry scrub, with the occasional creek or stream creeping between ridges. A World Devastator loomed dead ahead of them. Its fiery mouth was open wide and pulling one of those hills into its maw: scrub, dirt, rock, and all.

"Hey, Spotter One," Tycho called, "Do they have a firing solution yet?"

"*Yakez* is getting one now, stand by."

"Well, warn us when they send hot light down. We don't want to get fragged."

"Understood. Stand by."

Tycho scowled and checked his scanners. He was expecting the Devastator to be released a swarm of those damned nimble robotic TIE fighters to attack *Yakez*, but as yet none of them had come out of its bay.

He switched his comm to Hobbie's private channel. "Five, do you see any hostiles around that Devastator?"

“Nothing, boss.”

Before Tycho could ask anything else, the scout ship hailed him again. “Rogue Lead, this is Spotter One.”

“Hot light incoming?”

“That’s right. We’ve also picked up two squads of incoming TIEs from the south.”

That was the opposite direction as the Devastator. Tycho checked his scanners but saw nothing. “Droid fighters?”

“Negative. Looks like TIE Defenders.”

Tycho swore. Defenders were by far the best ships the Empire had produced, more than enough to tackle X-wings, and the only TIE Defenders he’d sparred with this on this campaign had been flown by Turr Phennir’s 181st.

“All Rogues,” he called. “Follow my lead!”

He pulled the fighter’s control stick against his chest and soared upward, leaving the hills and the Devastator far behind. As he soared up toward the clouds he saw a flash of green light as *Yakez*’s first volley of turbolaser fire cut through the atmosphere toward the Devastator.

“Whew!” Gavin’s wingmate, an Ishi Tib named Bashke Arndath, called. “They’re lighting up that Devastator!”

“Look alive,” he warned his pilots. “We’re looking at One-Eighty-First from the south.”

That cut the chatter fast. Tycho leveled out in the planet’s upper atmosphere and checked his scanners again. Sure enough, two full squadrons were approaching. He spotted another squad of E-wings from *Yakez* lancing to intercept, but Phennir would prioritize Rogue Squadron above all other targets.

“Put power to forward shields,” Tycho said. “Prime your torps. We turn on my mark and let ‘em having it.”

He watched his scanners, waited until the Defenders were close to firing range, then spun his X-wing into a hard turn. White clouds and blue sky whipped around him. He stopped the turn when he spotted a dozen approaching TIEs in the far distance. They looked so small but they’d be on him in seconds.

“Grab targets,” he called, “Mark!”

A single torpedo lanced out of each X-wing. Tycho immediately called for them to break formation and scatter. So, too, did the TIE Defenders, but not after popping off rounds of their own.

The X-wings spun, dove, and weaved vapor-trail ribbons in the sky to avoid the enemy torps. One edged so close to Tycho that he had to fire off a spray of chaff that intercepted the detonated the torp. The concussive force the blast still buffeted his X-wing and rocked him hard in his cockpit.

Nevil, Pagat, and Inyri formed up behind him as he checked his scanners. Two TIE Defenders had been taken down by missiles, but two full flights of enemy ships had zeroed in on Hobbie’s depleted three-ship formation.

Tycho and Phennir had trained under the same man, Baron Fel. They understood the same tactics, could anticipate the other’s moves. Right now, he knew, Phennir was trying to pick at the weakest flight in the squadron.

“A little help here!” Hobbie called.

“On our way,” Tycho said, and gunned his engines.

A spray of red quad-laser blasts rocked Turr Phennir in his cockpit. He was about to tell his pilots to stay in formation and destroy the trio of X-wings in front of them when Lieutenant Cyrillian called, “Incoming torps!”

Their shields had already been buffeted hard by one volley and might not withstand another. Phennir swore and called, “Break formation! Break!”

He rolled his Defender toward the planet’s surface and cut engines. He dropped like a heavy stone and the torpedo trailing him struggling to match. It shot in front of his viewport, slowed as it tried to turn and vector toward him, giving him an easy chance to pick it off with his laser cannons.

He checked his scanners and saw that Cyrillian’s squad had done the same. No casualties, but the three-flight of X-wings had scattered.

Of the two pilots from Gold Squad that had been hit by the Rogues' initial torpedo volley, one had been able to eject, but the other had not. The score from this campaign was still in Colonel Celchu's favor. He noted, too, that the Rogues were down to eleven ships, which meant someone had killed one of their pilots at Tyan, but not anyone from the 181st.

It was, frankly, an insult, and it needed to be remedied.

Cyrillian took her lead flight and chased after the X-wing formation that had pulled into the upper atmosphere. The one that had intercepted their recent attack was wheeled upward as well, leaving their afts and bellies exposed.

Phennir called the closest Defender flight to fall in behind him and charged. Torrents of green plasma still fell from the star destroyer in lower orbit to impact on the Devastator, but Phennir hardly paid it any mind. He'd been tasked with safeguarding the giant factory ships but his real goal was the defeat of Rogue Squadron, pure and simple.

He and his wingmates popped off single rounds of torpedoes. The X-wings broke formation and deployed chaff that caught the torps, but the attack had accomplished its goal regardless. Phennir vectored in on the lead fighter.

The X-wing danced and weaved through the clouds but Phennir stayed on him. He knew Celchu's movements by now, just as Celchu knew his, and their fighters twirled and danced through the sky but Phennir could never land more than glancing laser-blasts on his shields.

At one point the rebel pilot even managed to duck into a high white cloud and shunt his engines. Phennir's fighter leaped forward into a clear blue sky. He swore as Celchu fell behind him and popped off two rounds of torpedoes. He pulled up in a tight loop, hoping to confuse the torps' guidance systems or overload their thrusters.

His maneuver caused one torpedo to stall out and tumble toward the planet, but the other impacted on his aft shields. He threw all power to his energy barrier right before the impact and saved his own life. The force of the explosion nonetheless sent Phennir tumbling toward toward the planet,

through layers of clouds, until he could finally bring his engines back online and soar upward once again.

He checked his scanners, saw the dogfights wheeled overhead, but couldn't mark which X-wing was Celchu's. He swore and commed Cyrillian.

"Gold Leader, report."

"Took one down, sir," the woman's voice swelled with pride.

"Excellent. I'll be back with you in a moment."

"Yes, sir, I—" He heard Cyrillian gasp, then say, "Colonel, *Reaper* has arrived in orbit! The Rogues, they're running back into space."

Falling back to *Lusankya*, no doubt. That might indicate Pellaeon's plan was on target, or it might not.

"Follow them, Gold Leader," he said. "I'm right behind you."

He pointed his Defender straight skyward and gunned his engines. They wouldn't be able to chase the Rogues all the way to *Lusankya*, but they might be able to pick off another fighter or two. Already Cyrillian had helped bring the score closer to even, and even though Phennir hadn't gotten the kill himself, it still made him feel better about the day.

And if even the Rogues did escape Obreedan, he knew the day was far from over.

"All ships, fall away from the planet!" A'baht called to his crew, but Captain Kaeori had already given the order.

Charnak and *Yakez* both began turning around and pushing back from Obreedan, but they were big vessels and it would take crucial minutes to reverse course. He checked the sensors and saw that *Lusankya* and her support vessels, including the two Dornean gunships, were already pulling out of Obreedan's gravity well. They'd be ready to jump to Orinda in minutes, well before *Charnak* and *Yakez* were clear to flee.

And *Reaper* was hovering on the other edge of Obreedan's orbit, midway between the poles occupied by

the two Republic drag ships. Pellaeon had arrived, but from a different vector than anticipated. It was a small surprise, not enough to ruin the plan, but a surprise nonetheless, and one that might bode ill for the rest of the fight.

Kaeori called from the communications station, "General, Antilles is hailing us."

A'baht hurried over to the comm station as fast as he could. He stepped into the holotransmitter's viewing field to see two blue electronic ghosts looking back at him: Antilles and Carson.

"Gentlemen, there's not much time," Antilles was saying. "*Lusankya* is going to jump as soon as we clear the grav well, as are *Endurance* and the rest of the ships."

"What interdicator will we use?" Carson asked.

"We'll use *Spirit of Corellia*," Antilles said, naming the CC-7700 frigate Bell had brought with her. "She's further from *Reaper*. She'll put her grav well up in four minutes exactly."

That was barely enough time to get clear of Obreedan's orbit. Carson asked, "Can't spare any more time, General?"

"I'm sorry," Antilles shook his head. "If you get stuck, form around *Spirit* and try to hold off attacks as long as you can. Don't think you have to sacrifice yourselves. Just delay *Reaper* for as long as you can. General A'baht, you'll be senior officer once Bell and I leave. When you think things look bad, tell *Spirit* to drop her drag field and run."

Kaeori looked like she wanted to shout behind him, but A'baht just said, "Understood, General. Good hunting at Orinda."

The second both holos winked off, Captain Kaeori half-shouted, "Who the *kriff* does he think he is? We-"

"He's your commanding officer," A'baht snapped, then raised his voice. "Helm, get us out of this grav well as fast as you can! Go!"

Charnak shuddered as they turned and flared engines. *Lusankya* and her support cruisers, so small by comparison, loomed in the far distance. *Reaper* couldn't be seen from

their position, but A'baht could make out the grey wedges of the two destroyers that had been attacking *Lusankya*.

"General," Kaeori called, "Captain Carson reports a Devastator coming out of the atmosphere. They're taking fire."

A'baht hurried over to the tactical holo. *Charnak* was clearing middle-orbit and might make it out before the time window closed, but *Yakez* was suffering barrages from the World Devastator now rising from the planet. Worse, the monstrosity was pumping out a stream of those damned robotic TIE/d fighters. Captain Carson's destroyer was already taking damage and starting to lag behind A'baht's ship.

There was no way *Yakez* would make it out in time. If *Charnak* fled, the two Impstars ahead would make short work of it.

A'baht was surprised by how easily the decision came.

"Captain Kaeori," he said, "Drop speed and begin firing on that Devastator. See if we can't slow it down."

The human's jaw dropped. "But General—"

"Do it, Captain. We don't leave allies behind."

It sounded good as he said it, but right as he did *Lusankya*, *Endurance*, and the other support vessels winked into hyperspace, on their way to the main brawl.

They were on their own now.

Reaper's bridge shuddered slightly as the rebel CC-7700 frigate raised its gravity well over the Obreedan system, trapping all ships inside.

"Well done, Antilles," Pellaeon muttered, too low to hear.

Behind him, Captain Arnef wasn't taking the situation with such aplomb. He snapped, "Admiral, I don't understand! That frigate just trapped itself in-system with us!"

"Exactly. Antilles is moving on toward another target. Probably Orinda."

"Orinda?" Arnef gaped. "Sir, without *Reaper*—"

"There are still ships at Orinda to defend it," Colonel Reige said from the tactical station. She pointed at the holo and said, "Look at that frigate. She's pulling away from the planet, trying to put as much space between herself and *Reaper* as possible."

"Antilles wants to buy himself as much time as possible at Orinda," Pellaeon said. "Captain Arnef, get on the line with *Nemesis* and *Death's Head*. Tell them to break off and try to box that frigate in. They can get close before we can."

Arnef frowned at the holo. "Sir, they're both moving to engage the two rebel ships left behind."

"Ignore them. Comm the Devastator down there and tell it to let them escape."

"Admiral, those cruisers can still pack a punch against *Nemesis* and *Death's Head*," Reige reminded him.

"That's only if they're ready to brawl. I'm sure their main goal is to protect that interdiction frigate. Captain Arnef, relay my order."

"Yes, sir." He snapped a reluctant salute and moved off.

Reige settled on Pellaeon's side and said in a lowered voice, "Is this what you planned on, Gilad? Getting stuck here while *Lusankya* pounds Orinda?"

"No. I thought Antilles would try something like this and I wanted to box *Lusankya* into Obreedan's orbit and keep this from happening. That's why I dropped us out of hyperspace on a vector he wasn't expecting."

Reige thought a moment. "You weren't expecting two interdictors."

"That's right," Pellaeon allowed. "But what's done is done. We can still catch up to him at Orinda."

"Should we call Rogriss now?"

Pellaeon hesitated. *Dominion* was his grand surprise and he wanted to save it until it was absolutely necessary. The *Bellator*-class destroyer was more powerful than anything the rebels had except, of course, *Lusankya*. Antilles' flagship would be able to out-fight it even with *Rampart* and the other destroyers helping Rogriss.

For a moment he thought of *Lusankya* dropping out of hyperspace right on top of his beloved *Chimaera*. It almost pained him as much as the thought of Mynar Devis getting shot down by some rebel snubfighter, but he'd been watching the 181st closely and was relieved that hadn't happened so far.

But he knew he couldn't keep the 181st out of the fight any more than he could protect *Chimaera*. In a battle this tight, with such high stakes, he had to risk every resource at his disposal.

"Rogriss stays where he is now," Pellaeon said firmly.

Reige looked disappointed. "Orinda's planetary defenses are still being rebuilt. Antilles can wreak a lot of damage with *Lusankya*."

"Then we won't give him time to do it. Captain Arnef," Pellaeon called, "Get me a line with Colonel Phennir. Tell him I have a very important mission for him."

Ensign Cha Niathal sucked in breath as *Lusankya* plunged into Orinda's orbit. Above the crew pit, Antilles stalked the center aisle of the bridge like a naval commander from an old holo-drama.

"Communications," he said, "Get me a line with Orinda's governor. Forward batteries, scope out the surface. Locate and target all defensive batteries and ion cannons on the northwest continent. Anti-starfighter turrets, prepare for incoming."

Niathal quickly complied. A group of scouts raced ahead and relayed their telemetry directly to *Lusankya*'s gunner computer. The detailed map of Orinda's largest continent resolved on her targeting computer, along with markers denoting the shield generators over Orinda's major cities and the ion cannon and long-range turbolaser emplacements. *Lusankya*'s computers already retained information about Orinda's defenses from its time as a New Republic world, and the data from the scouts confirmed that the Imperials hadn't changed anything much in the past six months.

It made Niathal feel better about her job, but her spirit dampened as she heard voices ricochet over her head.

“Two Impstars coming to meet us. They’ve also got an old destroyer, *Secutor*-class. She’s pumping out Howlrunners and droid fighters now.”

“Shields up over the capital. Weapons going hot.”

“Guns, target the offensive stations on the ground and open fire. Comm, where’s the governor?” That was Antilles’ voice, clip and calm.

“Not responding, sir.”

“General, we’re being hailed by the carrier. Identifies herself as *Rampart*.”

“Don’t respond. All ships, launch fighter screens. Except for *Endurance*; tell Bell to stay close to us. Weapons, fire when ready.”

Niathal didn’t understand why Antilles was refusing hails from *Rampart*, but it didn’t matter. She adjusted her aim, wrapped both webbed hands around the gunnery controls, and opened fire.

Twelve kilometers away, *Lusankya*’s forward guns thundered. Spears of green turbolaster fire broke through Orinda’s atmosphere. While their energy dissipated over long distances, the plasma weapons were unaffected by wind or aerial disturbances, unlike projectile weapons. They flew straight to their target. Niathal’s heart surged as the planet’s defensive cannons began to burst, one after another.

For a moment, she wondered whether those cannons were being manned by Imperials or by local Orinda citizens who had, just six months ago, manned those same stations for the Republic against the Empire. She supposed it didn’t matter; back then, the planetary government had been shocked into surrender by *Reaper*’s unexpected arrival. This time its defenders, Imperial or local, would have a battle plan and they would stick to it. Every cannon Niathal destroyed meant Republic lives saved.

The gunnery section commander gave further orders, directing certain gunnery sections to fire on specific

installations. Within fifteen minutes of steady bombardment, Niathal and the other gunners had reduced Orinda's main defenses to slag. The Mon Cal vessels *Poesy* and *Mon Alora* were pulling ahead to intercept two of the star destroyers, while *Lusankya* herself took up a steady place orbit directly over Orinda's main continent, as if daring *Rampart* or another Imperial ship to engage it in direct combat.

The Imperials were many things, but they weren't fools. They knew no other ship but *Reaper* would be able to survive a fight with *Lusankya*, and *Reaper* was still trapped at Obreedan. In the end, it would come down to how long the local governor was willing to hold out in hope of Pellaeon's arrival.

Lusankya's captain ordered all forward guns to cease fire. Niathal took her hands off the controls, sat back, breathed deeply, listened. The anti-starfighter guns were still firing, and she heard reports of various fighter units falling back to defend *Lusankya*'s bridge from suicidal runs by the droid TIEs. She couldn't see out the viewport from her position in the crew pit, and the flash of outside explosions spilled across the deck she felt a spike of helplessness.

Well, she thought, at least there wouldn't be any Devastators to worry about.

Tycho rolled behind the nearest TIE/d fighter and pumped quad laser-blasts into its spherical hull. The craft exploded without even trying to evade. Beside him, Kral Nevil destroyed two more with another quad-linked blast.

"These things aren't worth wasting torps on," the Quarren said.

"Don't be too sure of that. When they want to dance, they can dance." Tycho pulled his control stick back and rose high over *Lusankya*'s superstructure. Nevil followed, and Inyri and Panat followed behind them.

"They keep throwing themselves at *Lusankya*," Inyri commented. "It's like they're just hoping to get lucky."

That seemed to be the strategy thus far. These droid fighters seemed to have taken the Imperial policy of disposability to a new level. With the World Devastators still gobbling up resources and pumping out war machines, he supposed it was a viable plan, but without them the campaign would be playing out very differently.

Tycho's flight pulled higher above *Lusankya* and wheeled about to face the planet again. The super star destroyer had taken out the planet's main defenses in a matter of minutes; Wedge must have been on the line with the planet's governor now, trying to convince him to surrender. There was no reason to expect the Imp ships in orbit to respect that surrender declaration, but it would be the first step in securing the planet.

Poesy and *Mon Alora* had moved to engage two of the Impstars, while a third hovered close to the broad, two-kilometer-long *Secutor*-class ship. With *Reaper* out of the picture, it was the largest Imperial vessel over Orinda and the centerpiece of its defensive posture. If they took it out, the governor down on Orinda would probably be much more likely to give in.

Tycho was about to comm the bridge and ask permission to spearhead an offensive against the carrier when the bridge called him instead.

"Rogue Leader, this is *Lusankya*," a female voice said in his ear.

"Standing by,"

"What's your status, Rogue Leader?"

"We're okay, *Lusankya*. Lost one ship down at Obreedan. Ten fighters left." Arndath had been taken out fighting the 181st. That meant one more letter to write if they got through this. Tycho was ashamed by how little he'd known about the Ishi Tib.

"Rogue Leader, General Antilles wants you to form up with Knave and Slash Squadrons and head for *Rampart*. We're sending the Dornean ships with you."

"Is that the carrier?"

"That's right."

"Understood. Take it out?" He thought they'd need at least one of the Mon Cal ships for a fight like that.

"Negative, Rogue Leader. Sensors show they've just launched Xg-1 Starwing missile boats. Intercept and destroy."

"Affirmative, will do," Tycho said, and snapped the connection off just before he swore aloud.

The Rogues had tangled with Xg-1s only once this campaign, during the engagement at Traval-Pacor. Like the TIE/d fighters, they were something Pellaeon had apparently dug out of some hidden storehouse in the Deep Core. Unlike them, the Starwings were anything but disposable. They carried heavy payloads and were made to target capital ships. Unlike New Republic K-wings, they were also small and fast and didn't require fighter cover.

"All Rogues," he called, "On my tail. We've got Starwings to take down." He heard gasps and a few muffled swears, then added, "Look on the bright side, at least we don't have to tangle with the One-Eighty-First."

The Rogues joined the formations of E- and A-wings streaking toward *Rampart*. The diamond-shaped carrier, topped by twin command towers like an old Clone Wars destroyer, loomed ahead. The destroyer on its flank moved forward as if to intercept, and without looking at his scanners, Tycho could see several flights of I-7 Howlrunner fighters drop from its hangar bay and race toward them.

"Better than droid fighters," he muttered, then switched his comlink channel. "Knave Leader, do you see those Howlrunners?"

"Affirmative, Rogue Leader."

"Think you can take 'em out for us? We'll help Slash with the Starwings."

There was a hesitant pause, but Knave Leader acquiesced. "Understood. We'll keep them off your backs."

"Thanks, Knave Leader," Tycho said. First called, fist claimed.

As the E-wings broke formation and dashed for the Imperial vessels, the Rogues fell in behind the A-wings. He could see the Starwings on his sensors now and spotted a few formations against the pale backdrop of *Rampart's* hull. With three long wings, they looked like miniature *Lamba*-class shuttles if you ignored the rectangular missile launchers flanking the cockpit on either side.

"Okay, Rogues, select targets," he called.

The A-wings were already releasing their first volley. They broke formation as soon as they fired and Tycho shouted, "Mark!" as soon as the path was clear.

A second wave of proton torpedoes raced after the first. The Starwings didn't scatter. Their forward cannons darted laser blasts ahead, catching more than a few of the approaching projectiles. When the torps got close enough to impact the Starwings' shields absorbed more, but a few unlucky ships had their shields falter under impact, allowing shrapnel or even whole warheads to slip through. Each Starwing had a heavy payload, making each additional explosion especially spectacular.

To Tycho's surprise, the Starwings didn't break formation. They just kept on racing toward *Lusankya*. The Rogues and the Slashes dropped behind the craft just as some of the I-7 Howlrunners slipped past Knave Squadron. The X-wings and A-wings both had to break pursuit of the Starwings in order to dance with the Howlrunners.

It quickly devolved into a messy, awkward tangle. Inyri and Panat broke formation and Nevil barely managed to cling to Tycho's aft as they tried to shake a pair of Howlrunners. Help came in the form of Hobbie and Alinn Varth, who pummeled both Imperial snubfighters with laserblasts until their burst.

"All Rogues," Tycho called, "After the Starwings! Now!"

The ships were already getting close to firing range of *Lusankya*, and the super star destroyer's defenses were already overwhelmed with so many droid TIE fighters. Thankfully, Swift and Knave Squadrons were able to clear

up the remaining Howlrunners and rushed to help. The Starwings only broke into evasive maneuvers when the A-wings fired off another round of torpedoes.

When the X- and E-wings added their fire, they lit up the space ahead of *Lusankya's* bow. All those missiles caches going off made for a gorgeous light-show, but it also messed with Tycho's scanners.

"Can we get a mark on the Starwings left?" he called. "Anyone? Does anyone have sensors clear?"

"We've got them, Rogue Leader," Swift Leader reported. "Commencing cleanup now."

As Tycho and his flight races over *Lusankya's* nose he scanned the battlefield with his eyes and his clearing sensors. The destroyer's anti-fighter batteries were lighting up space all over and TIE/d fighters nimbly tried to avoid so many blasts. Tycho almost felt better when he spotted the distinctive glow of two Starwings' engines dead ahead, racing low against *Lusankya's* superstructure as they made a straight shot for her command tower.

"One Flight, on me," Tycho called, and without explanation he gunned his engines and dipped low. Anti-fighter flak burst on all sides and he prayed a silent prayer that *Lusankya's* defensive gunners wouldn't frag him. Through the flashes he still saw the Starwings' engine-flares straight ahead.

"Rogue Leader, I've got a lock on the target," Inyri said.

"Two, Four, are you locked onto the Starwings?" Tycho asked Nevil and Panat. When both pilots clicked affirmative, he said, "Double-shots! Mark!"

Eight crimson-trailed proton torpedoes lanced ahead. The Starwings, so intent on staying close above *Lusankya's* shields, didn't seem to notice them until seconds before they hit. One tried to juke away; the other burst spectacularly.

Too spectacularly. The debris and flame bounced off *Lusankya's* shields and flared in Tycho's face. He heard Panat give a yelp as four X-wings raced though the inferno and came out blind.

“Hold steady,” Tycho called. “Hold you fighters-”

“I’m hit!” Nevil cried. “Must’ve been shrapnel-”

“Eject, two! Eject!”

Something flashed to his port side, and he glimpsed the fiery nose of an X-wing smash into *Lusankya*’s shields.

“Did he get out?” Tycho asked frantically.

“I see him,” Inyri said. “He ejected.”

“I’m picking up droid fighters, incoming!” said Pagat.

Tycho was about to order them to break when he saw that familiar engine-glow, still straight ahead. “Three, four, get the fighters! Keep them from Nevil and call for a pickup!”

Inyri and Pagat clicked affirmative. Tycho hated to leave them in the lurch, and Nevil EV, but that last Starwing was approaching *Lusankya*’s command tower fast. He could see TIE/d fighters ramming themselves into its flickering defensive shields ahead, trying to overload it.

That Starwing, still heavy with payload, might actually be able to punch through.

Tycho gunned his engines until he could drop reticules on the Starwing. Laser-blasts sprang forward and danced on the vessel’s aft shields. It didn’t pull back; it was too close to the command tower and refused to abort its run.

Tycho sprayed laserfire against its aft shields one more time, then trigger two more torps. They lanced forward. One impacted on the shields, the second stabbed through and detonated the Starwings’ payload. Tycho pulled up hard to avoid the fireball and whipped past the edge of the command toward.

Tycho immediately commed *Lusankya*’s bridge. “Is General Antilles there?”

“He’s, ah, still negotiating, Rogue Leader.”

“Well, tell him he’s welcome,” Tycho said, and snapped and connection off. Laughing to himself like a giddy idiot, he soared upward to join the rest of the Rogues.

Turr Phennir slipped his TIE Defender down the narrow space between *Nemesis* and *Death’s Head*. His pilots trailed

behind him in a long line of ones and twos. Ahead, past the pointed gray bows of both star destroyers, the two big rebel ships were attempting to shield their interdicator.

It needed all the protection it could get. The CC-7700 was a lightly-armed, lightly-armored support craft. The other drag ship the rebels had brought with them, a heavy Mon Cal cruiser, could have held its own better, but Antilles had taken it with him to Orinda. Leaving three ships alone with a super star destroyer was an uncharacteristically ruthless move by Antilles, and he doubted if the crew of the three rebel ships in front of him liked being left dangling like bait on hooks.

As he cleared *Nemesis'* bow, Phennir checked his scanners. Pellaeon was leaving the battle to the other ships and pulling *Reaper* as far away from Obreedan as he could. He was clearly vectoring toward Orinda itself and preparing to jump the moment the CC-7700 was either destroyed or dropped its gravity well.

It was a tactically sound decision, but Phennir didn't like being left dangling either.

"All ships," he called, "Form flights. Head straight between the rebel ships and arm torpedoes to attack the drag ship."

"Lead, I'm picking up a heavy fighter screen," Devis reported.

"Punch through it, Red Leader. Don't look back."

"Understood sir."

It would be a hard and painful punch, but every minute they spent trapped over Obreedan was another minute Antilles had to beat Orinda into submission.

The space between the rebel and Imperial ships was aglow with lancing turbolaser fire. The 181st continued its narrow path between the plasma-bursts and cut straight into the enemy fighter screen.

X-wings and A-wings whipped past, splattering laserfire on his forward shields. A few popped out torpedoes and he did his best to pick them off with his lasers, but he didn't

turn and didn't stop, not even as a half-dozen of his pilots winked off the sensor screen behind him.

Suddenly it all fell away. The fighter screen was gone at the interdiction frigate loomed ahead of them, vulnerable.

"Leader, we have A-wings in pursuit," Lieutenant Cyrillian reported.

"Gold One, take your squadron and hold them off. Everyone else, on me."

Cyrillian clicked her affirmative and spun her squadron around to face the enemy rush. Phennir still didn't slow. The frigate sent out defensive cannon-fire to ward off the TIE Defenders and he jerked his craft back and forth in small, dodging slides, but never took his targeting reticule off the bow of the ship.

"All fighters, mark target and arm torpedoes," Phennir said. "Stand by to fire."

He waited as the ship drew closer, took one breath, two, three.

"Fire!" he called, and torpedoes lanced forward from the wave of TIE Defenders. The frigate's shields absorbed the first wave, and the second, but the third wave of torps from Green Squadron broke through and began tearing up the hull. Phennir and his fighters scattered and pulled away before slamming into the ship, but he pulled his joystick tight against his chest and wheeled around for another pass.

"All fighters," he called, "Targets of opportunity. Bring it down."

His pilots didn't hesitate to comply. Their torpedoes tore through the frigate's shuddering shields, one after another, and tore fiery geysers through its hull. Phennir didn't feel the g-force strain of a gravity well shutting off and, surprised at the frigate's resilience, raced past its bow and spun forward for one more pass at its bridge. In the distance, he saw explosions bursting against the engine-glow of the two rebel cruisers; marks of Gold Squadron's delaying stand. Cyrillian was keeping their backs clean, no matter the attrition to her people.

Phennir completed his turn and charged the interdictor head-on. By now all its shields seemed to have failed and its defensive guns struggled to fire. He dropped his targeting reticule on the light emanating from the command deck and thumbed the trigger.

He pulled away too soon to see it, but he knew his shot flew true. As he jumped over the frigate's back he felt the shudder of a dying interdiction field shake him his cockpit.

Immediately a voice came over his headset: "All vessels, the gravity well is down. Repeat, the gravity well is down. *Reaper* is outbound for Orinda."

Phennir spun his ship around to face the rebel cruisers. The firefight around them seemed to have died already.

"They're withdrawing fighters," Cyrillian reported.

Phennir could already see the two rebel capital ships turning their bows and changing vectors toward Orinda. *Nemesis* and *Death's Head* pulled forward as if to get in a final attack, but the rebel ships kept their shields up until they both winked into hyperspace. A few starfighters lingered for a second longer before they, too, flashed into nothing.

The same voice as before said, "*Death's Head*, join *Reaper* at Orinda. *Nemesis*, remain here to guard Obreedan."

Phennir didn't bother to ask what his orders were. He didn't need telling. A second later the voice said, "All ships from the One-Eighty-First fighter wing are to jump to Orinda immediately."

Phennir had already started to warm his hyperdrive engines and form up with the rest of his fighters. The sideshow was over, and they were all eager to get on to the main fight.

Any sense of triumph Gilad Pellaeon might have felt as *Reaper* reverted to realspace over Orinda was immediately quashed by the sight of the one of his star destroyers reduced to fiery slag between two Mon Cal ships. For a

second he was afraid *Chimaera* herself had been destroyed and rushed over the tactical station to find out.

He was relieved to find it was *Stormhawk*, instead, that had been broken, but it was small relief. *Stormhawk* and her captain had served loyally under Grand Admiral Thrawn when other ships would not; they'd deserved a better fate than what they'd gotten.

Now, at least, he was finally in a position to enact retribution.

"Captain Arnef," he called, "Begin deploying fighters."

"Yes, Admiral. What targets?"

He looked over the tactical display once more. *Chimaera* still hung off *Rampart's* port side, and as yet the rebels hadn't made to attack the pair of destroyers, though the two Dornean gunships sat between them and *Lusankya* to ward off whatever fighters or bombers *Rampart* might yet launch. The rebel star destroyer that had fled Obreedan had just arrived and also seemed to be heading toward *Rampart*.

Now that *Stormhawk* was down, the two Mon Cal cruisers were directing their attacks on *Right to Rule*. Pellaeon decided salvaging that vessel was the top priority and said, "Send three squads of Howlrunners and two Schimitar squads to cover *Right to Rule*. Tell Captain Harbid to help."

"And us, sir?"

He glanced at the viewport, where *Lusankya's* long narrow profile cut a dark line across the face of Orinda. "Take us in. It's time to enange Antilles."

As Arnef went off to relay orders, Reige appeared beside Pellaeon. She studied the tactical holo for a moment, then asked, "When do you want to call in Rogriss?"

"Not quite yet."

Reige wanted to object; Pellaeon could see it on her face and understood why. With *Right to Rule* and *Stormhawk* out of the fighting and *Rampart* and *Chimaera* walled off, Antilles would be able to throw his own super star destroyer and a half-dozen other capital ships at *Reaper*, giving him a decisive advantage.

That was, of course, the point.

The general himself clearly realized that. He was already pushing *Lusankya* into Orinda's outer orbit and turning one broadside to better face the other super star destroyer.

"Admiral Pellaeon," the comm officer called, "Colonel Phennir is requesting permission to engage *Lusankya*."

"Permission denied," Pellaeon said firmly. "Tell him to direct his attacks on those Dornean gunships. If he can clear them out of the way *Rampart* and *Chimaera* have a clear shot at *Lusankya*."

"Yes, sir."

Phennir would grouse over being denied the glamorous fight, but he'd get over it soon enough.

Reaper and *Lusankya* drove toward one another from opposite directions. Soon they grew close enough to pass broadsides. *Reaper* threw her starboard shields to full power to absorb the constant stream of green turbolaser blasts thrown at her. She responded in turn, washing energy across *Lusankya*'s port shields. The other ships in the fight, the starfighters and support craft and heavy cruisers, all cleared the space between the two giant craft. As the Mon Cal cruisers and their little Corellian gunships pulled back to engage *Right to Rule* and *Death's Head*, the Dornean cruiser and the new rebel fleet carrier pulled further away from *Lusankya* and settled above her bow.

Reige said, "Admiral—"

"I see them, Molgarin. I see them."

"That carrier doesn't seem to have emptied its berths yet. They'll be attempting a tactical strike—"

"I know, Molgarin."

"Gilad, if there's a time to—"

"I know." Pellaeon allowed a smile beneath his mustache and turned to the communications station. "Send Admiral Rogriss the signal. Tell him to bring his friends."

Charnak's bridge had dropped into an astonished silence as her crew watched the space below them glow bright with

nineteen kilometers of explosions and turbolaser fire. Captain Kaeori stood at the front viewport, looking as far down as she could from the command deck, watching the two giant star destroyers pummel each other's shields. A'baht was right at her side, and though he did a better job of hiding his amazement than the young human woman, he'd never seen anything like this exchange in his long career, and he knew he'd never forget the sight.

Charnak sat above the fray along with Admiral Bell's *Endurance*, and through his awe he remembered that if Bell was going to drop her bombers and fighters for a critical strike at *Reaper*, the time was now. The super star destroyer's command bridge had passed beneath them and would get further away by the minute.

He pulled himself away from the viewport and went over to the comm station, where he requested a link to *Endurance*. A moment later, Bell's holo-image appeared in front of him.

"Admiral," he said, "You need to deploy fighters *now*."

"Just a minute—" Bell said, before static tore up her image. She appeared again a half-second later, saying, "Have approval from Antilles. Moving in now. Hold your position, General."

Before he could say anything, the image died.

A'baht stalked back to the viewport. He could get a better understanding of the fight from the tactical holo but he needed to see this with his own eyes. *Endurance* was dropping closer, putting herself near the laser-lit gap between *Lusankya*'s bow and *Reaper*'s stern.

"She needs to drop her fighters," Kaeori muttered beside him.

"She wants to give them cover until they're right within striking range."

"*Reaper* barely has any fighter shield. She should drop them now."

He wanted to scold Kaeori, tell her to trust the admiral, but she was right. Bell was holding on to her fighters for too long.

Suddenly the tactical officer called, "Captain! General! We have incoming!"

"Incoming where?" A'baht asked, but before he got his answer, Kaeori grabbed his arm and spun him back to the viewport.

He followed her pointed finger up to see the long, white, narrow wedge of a star destroyer directly above them. It was far larger than the standard *Imperial*-class, larger than anything he'd even seen save the ones brawling beneath him right then. Beyond that ship he saw six more smaller wedges in a tight formation, each one swelling with gravity well generators.

The second he processed it all, the big star destroyer opened fire.

"Fall back!" A'baht shouted. "Pull us out! Out!"

The entire deck trembled as *Charnak's* shields struggled to withstand the rain of turbolaser fire from above. As the cruiser reversed course, A'baht looked back down at *Reaper* and *Lusankya*, just in time to see two streams of fire from two different super star destroyers converge on Admiral Bell's carrier.

Endurance didn't stand a chance. *Reaper* tore a flaming hole in her starboard side while the new destroyer vaporized her command tower with a wave of concussion missiles.

There was another set of explosions, brighter than before, and *Endurance* was gone, taking a complete fighter wing with her.

It all changed so fast, Tycho Celchu had no idea what to think.

"Oh kark," Pagat was saying over his headset. "Where did that thing come from?"

"What *is* that, Lead?" asked Gavin. "It's not as big as *Reaper*, but..."

Tycho scoured his memory even as he pulled his X-wing away from the long, gray, hump-backed star destroyer. "*Bellator*-class, I think."

"Where did Pellaeon *get* it? Did we know about this. Tycho?"

"I don't think so." Calling this a critical intelligence failure was putting it mildly. It had already become a fatally catastrophic one.

"Those drag ships just brought their grav wells online," Hobbie reported. "We're trapped."

The Rogues were in X-wings; they could run to the edge of the grav well and probably make it. Right now those six cruisers were still clumped together above the big *Bellator*-class ship, and until they spread out their interdiction fields weren't much bigger than what a single ship produced. If the ships had time to spread out, though, their overlapping fields could conceivably raise a drag field over half the system.

The Rogues weren't trapped, not yet. *Wedge* was trapped. *Reaper* was still blasting his broadside and the new destroyer was dropping in from above with all guns blazing. *Endurance* had been vaporized in an instant. *Charnak* had barely managed to slip away without being cut to pieces. *Lusankya* had no place to run.

But even as he thought it, *Wedge's* massive super star destroyer began to pivot. To his shock, it spun its nose toward *Reaper's* aft. Its engines strained as it dove *beneath* the vessel's blazing red thrusters, popping laser blasts upward as it went.

"Oh, *Wedge*," Tycho gasped, "That's a *star destroyer*, not a kriffing X-wing."

But as mad as the maneuver was, it was the only one *Wedge* had left. But cutting close beneath *Reaper's* hull, he managed to interpose Pellaeon's flagship between himself and the new vessels. Using *Reaper* as a shield was a way to stall for time, but they'd need a lot more to run to the edge of the interdiction field. The *Bellator*-class struggled to maneuver around the wreckage of *Endurance* while the interdictors themselves retained their tight formation high above. The gravitational pull of all those generators would

suck in what was left of Admiral Bell's ship and could potentially rip apart their hulls.

"Tycho, what do we *do*?" Gavin's voice was desperate, pleading. He sounded so young again.

Tycho didn't know. He didn't even bother to try calling Wedge- the man was barely holding his ship together now. He rolled his X-wing away from the star destroyers to get a better look, and the Rogues followed. He spotted the Mon Cal cruiser *Poesy* creep toward the interdictors while *Mon Alora*, *Viridian*, *Cerulean*, and a host of fighters tried to hold back one of the Impstars that had arrived with *Reaper*. Tycho didn't know what one Mon Cal ship could do against six other ships, but tackling the interdictors was the only way any of them would get out alive.

"Okay, Rogues, let's go tackle those drag ships," he said, and pitched his fighter into a steep upward curve that would keep him well clear of the second super star destroyer.

"Tackle them how?" Hobbie asked. "There's *six* of them. What are we gonna use?"

Prayer, Tycho thought. It was all they had.

Turr Phennir rolled his TIE Defender away from the rebel star destroyer and spun it to face the conflagration in Orinda's outer orbit. Pellaeon's plan had gone off, but Antilles had reacted with expected ingenuity. By slipping beneath *Reaper*, he'd blocked himself away from *Dominion*'s attacks, narrowing the fight to another one-on-one slugfest between super star destroyers. Seven rebel capital ships were making a desperate strike at the interdictors but Captain Harbid was taking *Death's Head* to engage them.

"Colonel," Lieutenant Belkaron said, "I'm picking up lots of snubfighters, headed for *Death's Head* and the drag ships."

"What kind?"

"Looks like... Some A-wings and E-wings. X-wings in the lead."

“Rogue Squadron,” Devis said. “It has to be.”

It wasn’t a leap in logic; only the Rogues would be bold enough to charge six interdicator cruisers and one full star destroyer. In this case, though, desperation was as much motivation as anything. Fighting wouldn’t break them out of Pellaeon’s trap, but it would give the rebels the illusion of hope until *Reaper* and *Dominion* could flank *Lusankya* on either side and crush it between them.

“After them,” Phennir called, and pulled his fighter into a steep climb.

A’baht leaned close over the communications console, straining to hear Captain Carson’s words above the uncharacteristic clamor on *Charnak*’s bridge.

“We’ll reach your position in five minutes,” Carson’s blue holo-image was saying. “Your gunships too.”

“*Lusankya* is barely holding her own against *Reaper*,” A’baht said. “*Poesy* and the other support ships are attacking the interdictors, but I don’t know what good it will do.”

“None of us are going anywhere with the drag field up,” Carson reminded him. “We have to do *something*.”

“General,” Captain Kaeori said, suddenly at this side, “The other big destroyer is on the move.”

A’baht braced himself. “Where?”

“She’s pulling away from *Reaper*, toward the drag ships.”

Carson clearly overheard. “She’s going after *Poesy*,” he said.

A’baht didn’t have to look out the viewport or at a tactical holo to know his ship’s position. “We can intercept before it gets there. Together, we can at least slow it down.”

Even through the flickering holo, he could see the grim severity settle on Carson’s face. “Best get to it, then. *Yakez*, out.”

The holo winked out. A’baht looked beside him at Kaeori.

“We won’t last long against that super star destroyer,” she said.

“We won’t last long no matter what we do, but if they take us down, I want them to remember us. I want to make them hurt.”

Kaeori nodded. Giving hurt was the only reason she had left.

As she spun off to relay orders, A’baht dared look out the forward viewport. They begun to spin toward the planet, toward the hump-backed gray dagger, seven kilometers long and bristling with weapons.

No, even with Carson and the two gunships, they wouldn’t last long. *Charnak* lurched forward anyway. Thirty seconds later, her gun barrels opened and delivered the first volley of hurt.

As Turr Phennir soared toward the six interdictors, still hunched in a tight diamond formation at the rebel cruiser and gunships nipped at them from all sides, a half-familiar voice crackled in his ear.

“Colonel Phennir,” it said, “This is *Dominion*.”

“I heard you, Admiral.”

If Rogriss himself was calling, something had gone wrong. As he glanced at his scanners, Rogriss said, “The rebels have caught us in a pincer. We’ll be delayed getting to your position.”

“Understood, sir. We’ll clear out as many rebels as we can until you get here.”

“Thank you, Colonel.

“You can depend on us, sir.”

“Good. *Dominion*, out.”

Phennir turned his craft to one side, good enough to get a good sideways look out his viewport. *Dominion*’s long wedge was caught in a pincer attack, just as Rogriss had said: the heavy Dornean cruiser off the starboard bow, the captured star destroyer on the port side, with two more gunships making strafing runs.

None of that was enough to hold *Dominion* for long. As he spun his ship back toward his target, it was clear the rebels

intended to go down fighting fierce. They'd encircled the interdictors, pushing them tighter together. The big Mon Cal cruiser had swung to deliver heavy missile barrages on one interdictor even as *Death's Head* plunged toward her other side. It had no place to run and no room to fight.

The rebel fighters, though, were swarming around the other drag ships. He spotted the squadron of X-wings flying cover for the skinny Mon Cal frigate and knew what to do.

He ordered, "Gold Squad, Green Squad, help *Death's Head* pop that cruiser. Red and Blue Squads, with me. We're going to break that frigate."

His squad leaders clicked affirmative. Two dozen TIE Defenders kicked ahead toward the frigate, which was already taking fire from the two interdictors it had placed itself within firing range of. The long MC30 model packed a good punch for a ship its size, but the only reason it had lasted as long as it had against two drag ships was the fighters flying interference for it.

As the frigate swelled in his viewport, Phennir called, "Blue Squad, begin strafing runs on the frigate. Red Squad, with me. We're taking on the X-wings."

"Yes, *sir*," Devis said eagerly.

The X-wings saw them coming and pulled back from their strafing runs on the interdictors. Proton torpedoes arced toward them but the Defenders held close formation, snapping off a hail of laser blasts that turned most of the missiles into fiery flowerbursts.

The remaining few warheads ripped through the shrapnel. Phennir and Red Squad broke apart, scattered. Phennir's sensors pinged alarm as one warhead locked onto his exhaust trail. He pulled his fighter into a quick roll, then dove fast toward the frigate. His straight shot allowed the torp to catch up to him faster, and right when it was about to hit he dove fast around the frigate's narrow midsection. The torp attempted to shift vectors and catch his flank but instead slammed into the frigate's shields and exploded.

“Nice flying, boss,” Devis said as his flight settled next to Phennir’s ship. He could sound like a giddy child sometimes.

“Indeed,” Phennir muttered. He checked his scanners: the Rogues had broken into three flights and were engaging Red Squad. He saw three in the lead flight and was dead certain the that one belonged to Tycho Celchu.

“On me, Lieutenant,” he called, and flew to intercept Celchu’s flight.

The Rogue pilots saw him coming. Instead of turning their tails to fleet they spun their noses to face him and fired off a spray of red quad-laser blasts that lit up his shields, blinding him.

“I’m hit!” he heard Devis cry.

“Full forward fire!” Phennir shouted. “Now!”

His ship shuddered as he squeezed the firing trigger and shot blindly into space ahead. The shield-scatter cleared just in time to see the four X-wings peal and break formation.

“I lost one stabilizer,” Devis said. “I- *damn it!*”

Phennir and the other pilots broke formation to chase the X-wings, but Devis’s ship shot forward on a straight line toward the green-blue glow of Orinda.

“I can’t maneuver!” Devis shouted. “Engines are felled.”

“Eject, Red Leader!” Phennir snapped. “Get out now!”

He saw a puff of vapor as Devis’s ball cockpit detached from the rest of his spiralling fighter. Then red laser-blasts scattered on his shields and blinded him again.

“Red Flight, on me,” he called. The fight was far from over.

It was damned hard to keep *Mon Alora*’s back clean when the damned 181st kept wanted to dogfight.

“Lead, they’re starting to overwhelm *Alora*’s shields,” Gavin called.

Tycho spun toward the frigate just in time to see a group of TIE Defenders drop their torps from close-range. The first few projectiles exploded on *Mon Alora*’s shields, but a few more slipped through the flickering energy fields and

impacted on the aft quarter of the hull. Tycho winced as he saw her blue thrusters flicker for a moment. This close to the interditors, she was liable to get pulled in by one if her engines failed.

Tycho flicked his comlink to call *Mon Alora*, but before he could say anything, the four remaining TIE Defenders from the flight that had attacked him fell on his tail again.

"These guys don't give up!" he hissed.

Instead of Pagat or Inyri, a gravelly Mon Cal voice replied, "Say again, Rogue Leader?"

Tycho dipped his X-wing toward the clump of anti-starfighter turrets on *Mon Alora's* back. "I'm flying toward you now! Can you clear these bandits off me?"

After a pause, the Mon Cal said, "We see it, Rouge Leader. Pull back in four-point-three seconds."

Tycho had no idea how to count three-tenths of a second, but he tried. Those 181st pilots were fiercely intent, even as he dove straight for *Mon Alora's* shields.

The turrets opened fire a split-second before he pulled the joystick back. Their red plasma bolts nearly fried his aft shields as they whipped under his hull and into the faces of the attacking TIE pilots. One Defender exploded outright. The other broke formation and scattered as *Mon Alora* kept peppering their shields with more anti-starfighter fire.

Elation was short-lived. Another group of TIE Defenders dropped their torps just as Tycho was pulling away. He saw the flash behind him and said, "*Mon Alora*, what's your status?"

"Engines... damaged, Rogue Leader."

"Reverse course now, or you'll get pulled in by a drag ship!"

"Attempting... stand by..."

Tycho wheeled around to face the frigate's aft. One engine was already dark. The others were bright but flickering as they strained to reverse course. At the far end of the ship, the nearest interdicator was peppering *Mon Alora's* nose with turbolaser fire and threatening to break through its shields.

“Lead,” Hobbie said, “*Yakez* and *Charnak* are damaged. The two gunships are gone. That other super star destroyer is moving forward.”

Tycho swore. The 181st was regrouping and the SSD’s fighters would reach them in minutes. He checked his scanners and saw that *Poesy*’s shields were on the brink of collapse as she was squeezed on both sides.

He didn’t even want to see how *Lusankya* was holding up. Then that gravelly Mon Cal voice said in his ear, “Rogue Squadron, fall back. Repeat, clear the area!”

He didn’t understand. Without the fighter screen the frigate was dead. “*Mon Alora*, repeat that.”

“Get *back*.” Static distorted the voice. He saw the ship lurch forward to the closest interdicator.

“What are you *doing*, *Mon Alora*?”

“Debris might.... Force drag ships... field.”

“Tycho,” Gavin called, “She’s going to ram!”

Tycho pulled away as fast as he could. The other Rogues followed and, after the delayed realization, the 181st pulled back too. Tycho pulled his X-wing into a broad loop until he had enough range of vision to see *Mon Alora*’s last moments.

Rather than plunge head-on into the heart of the drag ship, the frigate plowed into its nose. The collision seemed intent on providing maximum debris scatter. *Mon Alora*’s struggling stern swung past the point where both ships collided, even as explosions tore their way to the engine section. When the reactors blew, the ship’s twisted wreckage spun toward the open space in the middle of the interdicator formation.

As for the drag ship itself, for a moment it seemed like its four round gravity well projectors would miraculously survive the explosion. Then its forward missile magazines blew, chewing up the superstructure and starting a chain reaction that ripped the ship in two right down the middle.

The force of *Mon Alora*’s impact threw the remains of the interdicator into the middle of the formation, where the

remaining five ships' artificial gravity started sucking in massive pieces of debris.

Interdictors had many pinpoint-accurate guns for the express purpose of shooting down dangerous battle-flotsam drawn into their gravity wells. The broken hulls of two large capital ships was too much, even as chunks of debris were pulled in five directions at once. One drag ship was overwhelmed as the command tower of its sister ship slammed into its shields and tore through. Shrapnel fell like deadly rain and speared dozens of holes through its hull.

The other four ships had no choice. To avoid bringing death upon themselves, all four of them shut down their gravity well projectors at once.

Tycho didn't need to give the order, but he gave it anyway: "All Rogues, fall back, *fall back!* Jump out as soon as you're clear! Go go go!"

As *Lusankya's* deck rumbled under one barrage after another, Cha Niathal almost resigned herself to death. It was something she hadn't been able to do even two years ago, when those damned World Devastators fell from the skies and devoured her home city.

She tried to tell herself that at least now she was fighting them. She had done everything she could to harm them. There was a moral victory, at least.

But in the end, the Imperials had outsmarted and outfought them at Orinda, and death on *Lusankya*, under a hail of *Reaper's* turbolaser fire, would only be humiliation.

She wanted to weep and shout at once. She was about ready to slam her webbed fists into the console until they bled when the entire ship shuddered, a different kind of shudder, almost like the one they'd felt when Pellaeon had sprung his trap.

She should have known what it was, but it took a moment for her reluctant mind to process her sudden salvation.

Above her head, someone shouted it clearly: "That drag field's down!"

“Helm, get us out of here!” Antilles said. There was no mistaking the panic in his voice. *Panic*, from Wedge Antilles, the great hero. Niathal felt strangely relieved by that.

The ship shuddered as its engines pushed it away from Orinda. Niathal looked to the gunnery lieutenant and asked, “How close are we to the edge of Orinda’s gravwell?”

“Not close enough,” her superior grimaced as another volley from *Reaper* shook the ship.

To die now, so close to miraculous escape, would be cruelest of all. Niathal hated being stuck here in the crew pit, blind and helpless even as she controlled the guns of the greatest warship in the galaxy. She had to be stronger than that; she had to be in control.

She had to at least know what the devil was going on.

Niathal clambered to the ladder at the end the crew pit. Her section chief called after her but she barely noticed. She pulled herself up the ladder with shaking hands. The ship lurched when she got on top and she half-sprawled across the deck. She pushed herself upright, blinked her big eyes, looked around.

Nobody was looking at her. They all stared ahead at the broad field of stars, broken intermittently by flashes from *Reaper*’s turbolasers.

A humming sound seemed to rise from the heart of the ship.

Niathal breathed in deep.

Lusankya shuddered one more time, then starpoints because beautiful straight lines and they plunged into the blessed infinity of hyperspace.

After the remaining New Republic forces fell back to Qiilura, they began the long, ugly task of patching up their battle damage and shifting through their grief. Tycho was glad that Kral Nevil, at least, had been recovered from the fray over Orinda, and the first thing he did after getting out of his X-wing was go to the medical wing to see the

Quarren floating in a bacta tank. According to the medic, Nevil wouldn't be there long. His damage was relatively minor and there was a long queue of wounded who needed a turn.

After that, Tycho went to find Wedge.

He talked went to the bridge and talked to the first officer, who directed him to the quartermaster, who directed him, finally, to Wedge's personal quarters. When he got there Tycho almost didn't ring the doorbell; he knew his friend well enough to image the kind of grief he must be in, and wasn't sure if he should intrude.

But if Wedge wanted him to leave, Wedge would say so, and Tycho would leave. And if Wedge wanted him to stay, he would do that too.

When he rang the bell, he was beckoned in. He found Wedge sitting at the table in his cabin's kitchen, staring at an unopened bottle of Corellian brandy.

Tycho took the seat opposite him and asked softly, "How are you holding up?"

"How do you think?" Wedge didn't look up at him.

After a long and pregnant pause, Tycho asked, "Have you talked to fleet command yet?"

Wedge nodded slightly. "We'll be staying at Qiilura until..."

He trailed off. Tycho ventured, "Until they decide what's next?"

"I never wanted this command," Wedge said softly. "I never wanted... any of this. I just wanted to fly an X-wing. That's it. Nothing else. It's so much simpler. You're not responsible for all those people..."

Tycho wanted to tell Wedge it wasn't his fault. He knew Wedge wouldn't believe him. He wasn't even entirely sure if it was true, though he was ashamed to think that.

"We all underestimated Pellaeon," Tycho said. "And we had no idea he had another super star destroyer. NRI didn't pick up a clue. We were all flying into this blind. After this, we're just going to have to step back and regroup. Think

long and hard about what we want to do with the war, our careers, everything..."

"Everything," Wedge echoed. Impossible as it seemed, his expression got even more grim.

Tycho knew what he was thinking. "Have you tried calling Qwi yet?"

He shook his head. "No. I have no idea what I can tell her. This... I can't *talk* about this with Qwi, Tycho. It's... not her world. She can't understand this."

Tycho didn't say anything. He had nothing to correct, nothing to add.

Wedge reached out to touch the neck of the brandy bottle. He didn't look like he had the energy to even lift it. After staring into its amber glass for what seemed like forever, his grip tightened.

Just when Tycho thought he was going to push off the cap, he shoved it hard across the table. It nearly fell into Tycho's arms.

"Give me a warning next time, will you? I almost dropped it."

Wedge didn't seem to care. "It's not going to help."

That was true too. Tycho put the bottle on the table, right in front of him, and didn't try to open it.

They'd been through disasters before. Alderaan, Hoth, Ciutric, the battles against Thrawn and the Emperor's clone. They both knew that nothing could help except time.

He prayed they'd have enough of it.

Gilad Pellaeon stood in his personal quarters on *Reaper*, looking into the holographic face of Admiral Teren Rogriss. The projector here was much better than the one on the bridge. He could see the tired slackness in Rogriss' face, the empty look in his eyes. He wondered if the other admiral saw the same in him.

"We should be able to salvage the damaged interdictor," Rogriss said. "However, it's going to take time to repair."

"I understand that," Pellaeon said. "I'll see that it's done."

"Thank you, sir."

"You should know I received a message from the Moff Council less than an hour ago."

"Really? I'm sure they were thrilled." Rogriss sounded anything but.

"They are, in fact. They wanted me relay congratulations to you personally. They give you a good deal of credit for turning the battle."

"I suppose that means they'll want to launch the offensive further?"

"It's possible, though right now they're also looking to expand Imperial political influence along the border regions at places like Adumar."

Pellaeon was glad the Moffs were showing some similitude of good sense by not pressing for some full-scale invasion of Republic space that would critically overextend Imperial resources. He wondered how long it would last.

Rogriss squared his shoulders and said, "Admiral, I want to personally apologize for allowing *Lusankya* to escape."

Pellaeon blinked. He hadn't been expecting that. "It's not your fault, Admiral."

"Sir, I was in charge of deployment for the interdicator cruisers. I should have had them spread out sooner, before the rebels could pin them down together."

"*Dominion* was in a fierce fighter herself. No one is holding you accountable."

After a second, Rogriss nodded. "It's good of you to say that, sir."

For a moment they stared at each other through the transmission's electric blur. Pellaeon tried to remember the last time a high Imperial commander had volunteered to take responsibility for a misfortune instead of shoving it off on someone else. He was sure there'd been other times, but they'd been too long ago.

Before either of them could say anything, a red light blinked at the bottom of Pellaeon's holo-projector. He said, "I'm sorry, Admiral, but it seems I have another call."

“Of course, sir. I need to go oversee post-battle checks on *Dominion*.”

“Thank you, Admiral.”

Rogriss blinked, like he couldn't figure out what for. There were too many things for Pellaeon to list, and instead of waiting he snapped a silent salute. Rogriss returned it, then switched his holo off.

Pellaeon's projector automatically switched to the incoming cal. He'd barely lowered his hand to his side before he was met by a face he hadn't seen in well over a year and frankly never expected to see again.

The smile on Daala's face was honest and warm. “I heard congratulations are in order, Admiral Pellaeon.”

“Natasi.” He couldn't help but smile. “It's good to see you. Where are you-”

“Don't bother tracing the call.” Daala waved a hand. “I just wanted to talk to you, Gil. I'm not trying to wedge myself back into power. You've handled it better than I ever did.”

“You were the one who pulled what's left of the Empire together again. I have you to thank for that.”

And, he thought, for not gassing him as she had Harrsk, Delvardus, Teradoc, and the rest of the bickering warlords in the Deep Core. It was strange, being so glad to see someone you knew was so ruthless and deadly, but it was also comforting to know he was on Daala's good side.

“Someone needed to clear out the garbage,” she shrugged easily. “However, you know how to *keep* a super star destroyer, which automatically makes you better fit for command than me.”

“Thank you,” he said. “I've already gotten praise from the Moffs.”

Her face twisted in contempt. He laughed against himself and added, “They're ebullient, of course, but I tried to temper their enthusiasm.”

“Don't act humble, Gil. You do it too often. This was a major victory, and it's *your* victory.”

“Perhaps, but not as big as they’re making it out. We still lost two capital ships. The rebels lost four, but they still escaped with most of their fleet.”

“I don’t think they’ll try to crawl up the Entralla Route again.”

“No, but I doubt we’ve seen *Lusankya* for the last time.”

Daala hummed agreement. “Well, it’s a good thing you have three super star destroyers to their one.”

Pellaeon’s jaw dropped. “I thought you were *retired*.”

“I am.” Her smile got smug. “That doesn’t mean I don’t hear things.”

“Very *classified* things.”

“Oh, don’t worry, Gil, I’m not going to spill your secrets to the rebels.”

“Trust me, I wasn’t worried about that. Just...”

“Operational security. I understand. Trust me, I would never do anything to hurt you. You’re the last hope the Empire has to stay alive.”

He wanted to object, but he heard the sincerity in her voice and saw the honest affection in her eyes. It was a little too honest. He shifted, looked aside.

“How’s Liegeus?” he asked.

“He’s well. We’re still together.”

“I’m happy for you. Finding a family again, after all you’ve been through.”

“I was surprised myself,” she admitted, “But the universe is full of surprises.”

She had no idea, no idea at all. “Thank you for calling, Natasi.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll see you around, Gil.”

And with that, the holo winked out.

Pellaeon stared into the darkness of his room, listened to the silence. After the long and stressful battle, he should have wanted nothing more than sleep, but he knew he couldn’t not until he faced what needed to be faced.

He left his quarters and made his way through turbolifts and hallways to the medical center. Passing officers saluted

him like he was a hero but he walked like a man on the way to an execution.

Once he entered the medical wing, the chief doctor led him to the bed occupied by Mynar Devis.

He was surprised to see the man sitting upright, with a datapad in his hands. His short black curls were wet against his scalp and his light brown skin smooth and damp from a recent dip in a bacta tank. When he'd heard that Devis had been forced to eject from his TIE Defender over Orinda he'd feared the worst kinds of injuries: hypothermia, damage to the lungs, broken limbs. Devis looked like he'd be back flying in a day. Pellaeon didn't know if that was a comfort or not.

He didn't say anything; couldn't say anything. He just stood to the side, examining that face, picking out the shape of Hallena's eyes and the short jut of her chin, until Devis noticed he was there.

"Can I help-" the man started, then those eyes went wide, big and white against dark skin, just like Hallena's. He dropped his datapad into his lap and snapped a salute. "Admiral Pellaeon, sir! I had no idea you were coming! It's an honor!"

Pellaeon forced himself to say, "At ease, Lieutenant Devis." The words rattled in his throat.

"I had no idea you were coming," Devis repeated. "I, ah, thank you, sir. Thank you very much. I don't deserve this."

"You performed your duty bravely, Lieutenant. Colonel Phennir's said great things about you."

Devis blinked, like that was hard to believe. "I'm glad to hear that, sir."

"Please, no need to, ah..." Pellaeon trailed off. He had no idea what to say, what to ask. Devis just stared at him with Hallena's eyes, the surprise and joy on his face gradually fading to confusion.

He found a string of thought of grabbed it. "I wanted to ask after your family, Lieutenant. Is there anyone who need to be notified that you were injured? A parent, perhaps?"

"Ah, no, sir." Devis shook his head. "My parents are dead."

"Your mother too?" Pellaeon wasn't surprised. He'd been trying to put Hallena out of his mind for thirty years but it hurt more than he'd expected it to.

Devis's wet brow wrinkled in confusion. "Yes, sir."

"May I, ah... ask how she died?"

"It was a speeder accident, sir. I was a teenager at the time."

A speeder accident. How mundane for a woman like Hallena, how disappointing. All that drive and intelligence and zeal, cut short by a damned *speeder accident*. Given her anti-Imperial feelings, he'd half-assumed she been dead for years, but she'd deserved something better than that.

"My father died before I was born," Devis continued. "My mother said he was an officer in the Republic Navy. I always wanted to follow in his footsteps."

Something welled deep in Pellaeon's throat. He nodded because he didn't trust himself to speak.

"It's been an honor to serve you, sir," Devis said. "I'm glad I could tell you in person."

He looked into those eyes, Hallena's eyes vivid and real again after thirty long years, and he felt something wet in his own. He managed to say, "Thank you for your service," without choking, then turned on his heel and walked out of the medical ward.

When he stepped into the empty hallway the whole ship seemed to spin around him. He steadied himself with one hand against the bulkhead and brushed his eyes with the other. He pulled them away and saw water glisten in the creases of his calloused old hands. He couldn't remember the last time anything had brought him close to tears. Not Thrawn dying, not Endor, but this did it.

He heard footsteps down the hall and stood up straight. He blinked the last moisture from his eyes and walked on straight ahead: long steps and squared shoulders. The passing troops saluted him.

Pellaeon nodded but didn't break his stride because he knew they would slow and stare at his back after he'd passed, marveling not at the man but the hero, the symbol, the last hope. He tried to be what they needed: for their sake, and his own.

PART V: DOMINION
37 YEARS ABY

When Gilad Pellaeon returned to Bastion, it felt nothing like a homecoming.

There was no surprise in that. He'd spent most of the past two years stationed at Anaxes and Coruscant, and most of that time had been spent on *Megador*. After he'd left Corellia as a teenager without looking back, he'd spent most of his life aboard various spacecraft. *Megador* was but the most recent one in the line of transient homes, and not the most comfortable. Deep down he missed *Chimaera*; it was the ship he'd spent the most years on, and the ship on which he'd accomplished the most.

Chimaera, unfortunately, had been broken and lost during the Yuuzhan Vong invasion. Critically injured and hauled to a shuttle by Vitor Reige, he'd been forced to abandon it over Bastion, and by the time they'd retaken the capital and driven out the Vong it was gone. He still felt, obscurely, a sense of guilt over leaving that ship, like he would after failing a longtime friend.

Megador, at least, had escaped that fate. Like *Dominion*, she'd taken heavy damage during the initial assault and retreated to Bastion, where she'd undergone emergency repairs and helped fight off the Vong there.

The one time he felt welcomed at Bastion was when Molgarin Reige greeted him at the landing pad and escorted him to her office so they could speak privately. As they walked through the halls she asked politely after her son, whom Pellaeon had left in command of *Megador* in orbit, and promised to send down in due course.

When they reached her office, they sat down on either side of her desk and got down to real business.

"The good news is that there haven't been any more attacks," Reige told him. She sat back in her chair, crossed one leg over the other. "Maybe Ardiffe is doing his job."

"Maybe," Pellaeon said. "Admiral Niathal agreed to send elements of the Second Fleet to patrol the Alliance side of the border, for what that's worth."

Reige acknowledged that with a reluctant nod.

"I've arranged a meeting with the Moff Council for..." Pellaeon glanced at his wrist-chrono, recently set to Bastion's standard time. "Three hours. What do I need to know before then?"

"I don't know. What do *you* have for me?"

Pellaeon took the data-rod Kalenda had given him out of his breast pocket and placed it on her desk. "This was my parting gift. It contains all data recorded from sensor-sweeps of the battle sites by Alliance and local parties."

She didn't reach for it. "Probably nothing our own haven't picked up."

"Still worth checking."

"Have you reviewed it yourself?"

"On the way here, yes. Whoever attacked those ships was using a very large force. According to scans of residual exhaust traces, they were all using ships of Kuati design."

That didn't mean much, of course. Imperial star destroyers, even the ones built now at Yaga Minor, mostly used Kuati-made engines. The planet and its shipyards had themselves been in Alliance hands for some thirty years.

"It's impressive," Reige said, "To destroy these convoys so completely that you leave no witnesses, not even shipboard sensors logs."

"It certainly implies a military operation."

"Exactly." She let the implication fall awkwardly between them.

Pellaeon gave a small sigh. "Molgarin, I've been trying very hard to hold our relationship with the Alliance together.

I'm not going to go accusing them of anything without proof, and whoever's behind these attacks seems to be very intent on not leaving proof behind. Which is itself suggestive of something."

Reige raised an eyebrow. "Like what?"

"It's something besides simple terrorism. Terrorists want attention. Whoever has been making these strikes doesn't. Their goals are more complex."

"Not necessarily. Revenge is a simple emotion."

He was surprised to hear Reige rush to judgment like that. He'd have expected it from other commanders, or arch-conservative Moffs like Flennic, but she'd always supported his role in the Alliance. She'd seen the wisdom of allying with it during the Vong War and she had, with a little reluctance, agreed to support Pellaeon after he'd taken the role of the Alliance navy's Supreme Commander.

"Has something changed that I don't know about?" he asked. "Do you have some data I haven't seen?"

"No," she admitted, and gave a little sigh. "And I haven't simply decided to lay blame on the Alliance. But from every logical viewpoint I can see, they *are* the most likely candidates, even if these attacks aren't sanctioned by Niathal or Bwa'tu."

"There is another possibility," Pellaeon said reluctantly.

"What's that?"

It was a road he didn't want to go down, but it had to be said. "These attacks could be committed by Imperial citizens, trying to break us away from the Alliance."

"Ridiculous."

"Old hatreds cut both ways, Molgarin. It sounds like everyone in the Empire's already assumed the Alliance is behind these attacks, even you."

"It's not possible, Gilad. These were military attacks, and all of our forces are accounted for."

"So are the Alliance's, or so they say."

"The Alliance has far more worlds and ships than we do. It would be easier for rogue element to get lost."

“Molgarin, are you *sure* our ships are all accounted for, absolutely sure?”

“I can show you all the schedules, all the data you want. And no, I’m not just taking Flennic’s word for it.”

No, she’d have her own people working independently on Yaga Minor, spying on Flennic. She was no fool.

“There is,” he acknowledged, “One more possibility.”

Reige tilted her head. “And what’s that?”

“Molgarin, what can you tell me about the Lyor System?”

Reige got a distant look in her eyes, the kind she got when her thoughts fell back into the well-ordered catalog of her brain.

“Deep Core system,” she said at last. “Located on a spur off the Byss Run.”

“I knew that. What can you tell me about facilities we used to have there?”

“None that I’m aware of, but we both know there wasn’t really a *we* back then.”

That was right enough. Even when the Emperor’s clone had nominally reunited the warring factions in the Empire, all the petty warlords had been keeping secrets from one another, always juggling knives meant for each other’s backs. Miserable as it had been, their constant scheming had allowed some hidden resources to survive the destruction of Byss, including *Megador* and *Dominion*.

“Well,” Pellaeon said, “There was *some* facility there. It was destroyed within the past two to three years by an unknown party.”

Reige leaned forward. “Where did you learn that?”

“A contact.”

“In the Alliance?”

He nodded and said no more. The way General Celchu, or all people, had contacted him had been alarming in itself. Celchu was clearly very concerned about the potential of long-lost Imperial hardware getting resurrected, but there was more than that. Niathal and Kalenda hadn’t even hinted at the matter, even though it was exactly the sort of thing

they would have known about, that Celchu would have taken to them the moment he found out.

It meant that Niathal and Kalenda very likely didn't trust him when it came to Lyor and the Empire's old secrets.

It also meant there were probably other things they didn't trust him with.

It had been a wounding realization, and it had been gnawing at him during the whole flight to Bastion, but he wasn't going to share all of that, not even with Reige. The attacks had her on edge; she seemed more willing to jump to conclusions than usual.

When it became clear Pellaeon wasn't going to give any more, Reige said, "I'll look into this too. I promise."

"Thank you."

"Do you really think it has a connection with the attacks?"

"I think it's possible some third party- or some rogue element from either side of the border- might have found an old weapon to use against us. And you have to admit that the timing does seem... convenient."

"You said the installation was destroyed years ago."

"Two or three, from what I've heard. So around the same time I was busy dealing with the Killiks and Chiss. *That* timing is certainly too convenient to ignore."

"So is this information dropping into your lap just now."

"I don't think the Alliance is trying to throw me. I trust the source."

"Do you?"

Her gaze was skeptical, probing. Pellaeon was surprised to find that yes, he did trust Tycho Celchu, much more than he trusted Kalenda or Niathal. Those two were younger; they had been brought up in a different era and approached things differently than Pellaeon and Celchu, who had slogged through the same ugly war, many times meeting in battle on opposite sides. Between the right men it could breed a certain kind of mutual respect, even mutual trust.

He hoped he was right to trust Celchu. One way or another, he'd find out.

“All right,” Reige said finally, “I’ll do everything I can to investigate the Lyor System.”

“Excellent. In the meantime, I need to prepare for my meeting with the Moffs.”

“I don’t envy you that.” She allowed a familiar, knowing smile that hinted at the bonds they’d shared over the years. “Send Vitor down at some point too, would you? You’ve monopolized my son for far too long.”

“Don’t blame me for that,” he held up two hands. “It was Vitor’s idea to come to the Core. He’s a very big believer in the Alliance, you know.”

Something flickered across her face, a sadness perhaps, but it was gone quickly. She said, “You’re right. The optimism of the young, I suppose.”

“Vitor’s not so young anymore.”

“Younger than *us*, Gilad. Younger than us old fossils.”

That was what they were all right, two fossils, still with skin and flesh attached despite all they’d been through.

Too many were gone, but a few were still left. Just looking at Molgarin Reige, realizing that, was enough to give him a little confidence.

There was something off about Tycho Celchu that morning.

The old general was usually the picture of calm, confident respectability, but as he stood in Niathal’s office he kept shifting balance from one side of the body to the other, and he could never quite look her in the eye.

Maybe he just wasn’t happy with his new assignment.

“Admiral,” he said, “I know the convoy attacks are important, but I’d like to finish what I started. I don’t think what happened at Lyor is less important. It might even be more critical now.”

Niathal look up at him from behind her desk. “You believe this missing Imperial hardware might be involved in the attacks?”

“I think it’s definitely possible.”

“Perhaps. Or it could not be related at all.”

"I'd all admit that," he said reluctantly.

"There could have been nothing at Lyor. That base might have been just that, a base, and the Imperials could have destroyed it three years ago because they'd found a loose end that needed tying up. It could be that simple."

Celchu nodded but didn't seem to believe it. He didn't suggest once again they contact Pellaeon, and she was glad for that. He probably figured that the grand admiral had enough problems right then.

"If Lyor and the convoy attacks *are* related, General, you'll have a chance to investigate that at Adumar also."

"Perhaps. Put bluntly, Admiral, I still think you could send someone else."

"You have special contacts on Adumar, old friends."

"I suppose you could call them that."

"The Adumari have always been... prickly. Independent."

"You could say that too."

"Then you agree your contacts make you the best person to investigate there? If there's a chance anyone on that planet was involved, or if their security was compromised and *that* led to the convoy's destruction, we need to know."

"I understand." With a touch of resignation, he added, "I'll go to Adumar, Admiral. I just don't want the Lyor investigation to go cold."

"Kalenda is a tenacious type. She won't let it." Niathal tilted her head in a Mon Cal gesture of curiosity. "Has your contact on Corellia yielded anything helpful?"

Celchu had never identified his contact but Niathal and Kalenda both assumed it was either Wedge Antilles or his ex-spy wife. Celchu seemed determined to keep his retired friends retired, and she could see he was picking his words carefully.

"I was able to learn a little more. My contact had people check with the Five Worlds' traffic control and see if they could identify any YT-2800 ships moving at the basic time window that would match our target."

"And do you have an identification?"

“Maybe. There was an outbound ship and an inbound ship at about the right times, but they were using different transponder codes, neither of which match the ship used at Empress Teta.”

“That means nothing.”

“No, but it doesn’t guarantee either of those ships is the one we want.”

“Do you at least have the data from Corellian flight control?”

Celchu took a small data-rod from his pocket and place it on her desk.

“Excellent,” Niathal nodded. “I’ll send that to Kalenda’s people.”

Celchu put both hands on his hips and looked at her straight for the first time that day. “You’re focusing on the convoy attacks now?”

She nodded. “I’ll be sending some ships close to the Imperial border.”

“That’s more likely to spook them than reassure them.

“I know, but I want ships standing by in case something happens. If we can stop one of these attacks while they happen, catch the culprits, it will help everyone.”

She was assuming there would be more attacks. Celchu nodded; he’d assumed the same thing.

“I’ve also set asset tracking to make sure all task forces are accounted for at all times,” she added.

Celchu’s white brows drew together. “Do you think this could be some rogue Alliance element?”

“It’s a possibility we have to consider.”

Celchu nodded grimly. That, too, was something he’d assumed.

“Is there anything else from your Corellian contact?” Niathal asked.

Celchu shook his head. “Not yet. I’ve asked them to keep prodding.”

“And they know to be in touch with you at Adumar?”

“They will once you tell me what ship I’ll be going on.”

“I’ll decide that within the hour.”

An awkward silence settled between them. They looked at each other without quite meeting the eyes. Despite all Niathal’s assurance, the investigation into Lyor seemed to be coming to an end; even Celchu’s transit information probably wouldn’t come to much.

“Well,” Celchu said at last, “I’d better get packing.”

“Have a good flight, General.”

Celchu nodded. For a moment, he looked like there was something else he wanted to say, but then his jaw set tight, he turned, and he walked out of the room.

Niathal slumped back in her chair. After allowing herself a sigh, she took out her datapad and began reviewing the latest inventory of the Second Fleet. She had no idea what would happen to the ships she sent to the edge of Imperial space, and that meant she had to plan for anything.

She could, of course, request aid from Bwa’tu’s Fifth Fleet, or any of the other naval divisions, but drawing even more ships away from the Core would simultaneously scatter Alliance defenses and make the Imperials ever more edgy than they surely were now.

There were other possibilities. Local detachments from Bothawui, Hapes, Dornea, and Corellia were still in the Core after the recent naval exercises. The thought of sending a bunch of Corellians to defuse this tense situation, or any tense situation, almost made Niathal laugh. As for the Hapans, they had a long and mostly unpleasant relationship with the Empire. The same could be said with the Bothans and Dorneans, and many other races, but they might intimidate the Imperials less.

With another sigh, she got up and went to her personal communications station. She had a few more calls to make.

“You don’t have to come with us,” L’toth told A’baht as they stood in the office that was now the former’s and once the latter’s. L’toth had called the old general to see him right after getting orders from Niathal.

A'baht had to admit the thought of ditching was damned tempting, but he still balked at it. Been L'toth was part of the reason; things seemed like they could get dangerous and he didn't want to tell Kiles he'd left his son in the lurch.

But there was more than that. Against himself, A'baht was curious. The convoy attacks were a threat to the present state of peace, yes, but they were also a mystery waiting to be solved. They could, conceivably, point to a much larger threat.

"I'll come with you," he told L'toth. "Who knows? I might even be able to give helpful advice."

L'toth frowned a little. "I'm not inexperienced. I've fought the Vong, and the Empire before that."

"I know. I didn't mean to imply that."

"Then why do you want to come? Just a few days ago you were telling me it was best for us to stay out of other people's fights."

"In certain circumstances," A'baht corrected him.

"What about *this* circumstance?"

A'baht thought for a moment. "I think we're at a cross-roads right now, Been. The Alliance has held up since the Vong War, but there have been plenty of little fractures. Separatist factions on Corellia and other worlds, inequalities in recovery from the invasion. It's the kind of little fractures that, all together, might rip the Alliance apart like it did the New Republic.

"This situation is different, though. It came out of nowhere. And it's so very... dramatic."

"Dramatic?"

"It's very much so. A mysterious attacker drops out of nowhere, starts destroying Imperial civilian convoys in Alliance space, slaughtering thousands and leaving no trace. It's like someone *wants* to restart a war between the Empire and the Alliance."

"Some beings are saying it's a false flag attack. Rogue Imperials are attacking their own ships and blaming it on the Alliance."

"I'm sure in the Remnant, people are saying it's all the Alliance's fault. I have to admit, I'm more inclined to believe them."

"Why?" L'toth said, surprised.

"Because if there really is another war, the Imperials are going to lose. They're a pathetic rump state. They'd just lose even more sectors if they try to fight the Alliance."

"Maybe they don't see it that way."

"The Imperials are sick with pride. They always have been. But you'd have to be blisteringly stupid to think a war against the Alliance, and all its coalition, would be anything other than a disaster."

"Maybe they want something else," L'toth said thoughtfully. "Maybe they want to break off from the coalition, lock their borders down, cut out all outside influence."

"And become a fortified hermit state." A'baht considered. "*That* does sound rather believable."

L'toth sighed. "Well, we'll just have to wait and see, won't we?"

"When does *Charnak* push off?"

"Four hours. We're to head for JanFathal, then patrol the Entralla Route."

A'baht hadn't been in that part of space since the Orinda campaign, a quarter century ago. It had gone very badly, and a return felt like a bad omen.

L'toth hadn't been with him then. Back then it had been Jadesei Kaeori, that driven young human woman who'd been proud to captain a shipful of Dorneans against her hated Empire. She was dead now, lost to her own suicidal idealism, just like Farley Carson was lost to the Yevetha and Pollum Morano to the Yuuzhan Vong.

Too many people had gone off and died. That was reason enough not to leave Been L'toth now.

"Last chance to grab a shuttle back to Dornea, General."

A'baht shook his head. "No. Let's just consider this one more joyride in service of the galaxy's greater good."

“Well, I hope it’s the last one. At least for you.”

“So do I, Been. So do I.”

Tycho Celchu hadn’t stepped foot on Adumar in a quarter century. He’d first gone with Wedge, Hobbie, and Janson as part of a diplomatic mission trying to woo the planet’s leading nation-state of Cartann. When the first plan hadn’t panned out, they’d allied with the *other* states instead. In the end, the Republic got a new partner and Wedge got a wife, so it had been a pretty good turn all around. It had certainly helped improve collective spirits after the disastrous loss at Orinda months before.

He wasn’t surprised how little had changed. The planet had escaped the Yuuzhan Vong invasion and they’d been suckers for tradition anyway. Honor duels with archaic blaster-swords, so in fashion during Tycho’s last visit, remained a cultural staple, though efforts to reign in and regulate the practice had significantly cut down on the number of duel-related deaths recently.

That was what his welcoming party told him. Cheriss ke Hanadai was one of those things that hadn’t really changed over time, despite superficial differences. The small, dark-haired woman was more than twice the age she’d been when assigned as their guard and guide on contested Adumar, but she still had the same large bright eyes, elegant movements, and easy smile. After Adumar had joined the New Republic, she’d in turn joined its starfighter corps, even flying with Wraith Squadron for a short time. After the Yuuzhan Vong War, she’d gone back home and assumed command of its local defense forces, a position she still held.

“It’s not that I’m not glad to see you, but I’m not sure what you expect to get by coming here,” Cheriss said as she escorted him through the halls of the planet’s defense headquarters.

“Admiral Niathal thought I might be able to open doors other people can’t here,” he said. “I’m also here as a show of strength. Hoist the flag and all that.”

“Yes, that Alliance star destroyer in orbit does say ‘strength,’ among other things.” Cheriss wagged her head from side to side. “We’ve already given all of our sensor records from the site to Alliance intel. We handed all the wreckage back to the Imperials. It *was* there convoy, after all.”

“I know. You did the right thing there. Did you see the battle zone yourself?”

She nodded. “I got there before the Imperials did.”

“You’ve seen battle zones before. What did you think of it?”

After a moment’s thought, she said, “There was nothing in the way of projectile weapon remains. No cases or thrust capsules from proton torpedoes or anything like that. Whoever attacked must have used turbolasers only.”

“What about the dispersal pattern of the debris?”

“Well, by the time we got there it had been cold for a few hours. Stuff was staring to drift in different directions.”

“But you could still get a basic projection.”

As she led Tycho into her office, Cheriss said, “It almost looked like the whole convoy had just been washed over by one big wave of destruction. It wasn’t- you could tell they’d been ripped apart by lots of turbolaser fire- but that’s what the dispersal pattern reminded me of. Debris pushed along the ocean.”

“So you’re saying the attack came all from one direction?”

“Pretty much. Whoever pulled those ships out of hyperspace must have had a jamming field up to block their distress calls, plus a low-level interdiction field.”

“Why low level?”

“It didn’t look like those convoy ships even had time to rearrange themselves into a defensive position. The moment they dropped out of hyperspace, the other fleet must have been right on top of them, ready to blow them to pieces with turbolasers.”

Tycho thought, then asked, “Any signs of snubfighters?”

“Nothing.”

Tycho supposed it made sense. If the attackers wanted to hide their identity, sending fragile little starfighters into the battle zone would be far too risky, just like lobbing torps and missiles whose manufacture could be traced. A handful of heavy capital ships would have been able to make short work of that civilian convoy even without the help of fighter support.

Tycho decided to change tack slightly. "I've got another question. I'm not sure if you can answer it, but it's probably worth asking."

Cheriss leaned back against her desk and crossed her arms over her chest. "Go ahead."

"Has Adumar accepted any defense contracts with the Corellians lately?"

She frowned. "Most of the defense companies on Adumar are privately owned. I'm not privy to everything they do."

"But you must have heard some things, right? Industry rumors?"

"I haven't heard anything about Corellians, sorry. I'll let you know if I do. But even if they *do* make a contract, that's not illegal, is it? We just sold a bunch of missiles to the Remnant. Well, tried to. We're not sure if they're going to withhold payment yet."

"The Alliance has put caps on local defense capabilities. If the Corellians go beyond that, then yes, it is illegal."

Cheriss gave a little sigh. "Adumar makes weapons, Tycho. That's our role in the big scheme of things. We could debate the morals of that for a long time, but in terms of legality, well..."

"Your companies' big concern is credits."

"Just like any other business," she said, defensively.

"I'm not here to argue about this," Tycho held up both hands. "I mean, without Adumari weapons, the New Republic would have had a lot harder time pushing back the Empire. So let's leave that all aside now."

"Gladly." Cheriss seemed glad to escape that line of discussion. She asked, "How are the others?"

“Winter’s back on Coruscant, thanks for asking.”

“I thought so. But the *others*. Wedge, Hobbie, Janson?”

“Well, Wedge and Iella are on Corellia. Still have two lovely daughters. Hobbie’s a consultant for Incom, and Janson, well, last I heard, he’s trying to start up some brandy enterprise on Tanaab.”

“Do you see them often?”

“Sometimes. But not that much. None of them are on Coruscant any more except me.”

She made a humming sound. “Shame. You made a good team.”

“Well, we’re at peace now, and *hopefully* it’s going to stay that way.”

“I guess it takes a war- or a crisis- to bring people together.”

That was weird way of thinking, but she wasn’t wrong. Tycho would have never gotten through the war with the Empire without good friends on his wing, those three most of all. Once the fighting was over they’d started to slowly drift apart. He wasn’t sad the war was over, not at all, but a part of him did regret that he no longer flew, plotted, laughed, and drank with those good men every day.

“Well,” he forced a smile, “I’m a senior military man now. Have to be mature and respectable, and I couldn’t do that if I had Janson around all the time, could I?”

She smiled back. “No. I guess not.”

A comfortable silence dropped between them. Tycho savored it for a moment, but only a moment. He had something else to talk about.

“Cheriss,” he said, “How’s Admiral Rogriss doing?”

Her big eyes blinked. “He’s all right, I think.”

“You *think*? That’s not very informative.”

“He keeps to himself, Tycho. He retired after the Vong War and he liked to keep out of the public eye. He’s getting old, and I’ve heard his health isn’t the best.”

It wasn’t surprising, but it was still sad to hear. Teren Rogriss had been one of the rare Imperials with a sense of

honor, and in the end a mix of honor and war-weariness had driven him out of the Empire's service to become head of Adumar's local defense force. Before that, Tycho and Rogriss had, sometimes unknowingly, faced off at a number of battles, including Orinda and Kuat, and worked together to track down Warlord Zsinj.

"Is it possible I could talk to him? Could you put in a request?"

Cheriss nodded hesitantly. "I could try. I don't know if he'll want to see you, or what condition he'll be in."

"A request is all I ask. Please. It's important."

She frowned. "Do you think Rogriss might know something about the attacks? He left the Empire so long ago."

"I'd like to ask him some questions. It's a long shot, but please, I'd like to try."

She clearly didn't understand, but she nodded anyway.

"Thanks, Cheriss. This could mean a lot." He allowed a small honest smile. Niathal had been right; good friends did come in handy.

The shipyards at Yaga Minor were the only ones left in Imperial space, but they were as impressive as anything anywhere in the galaxy. During the Yuuzhan Vong War, Turr Phennir had led the 181st in defense of the clusters of orbital dry-docks, defense stations, refueling pylons, and construction grids that hung over the planet.

He felt, therefore, a bit of pride as his shuttle approached the largest orbital cluster. He had retired from Imperial service after the end of the war, but he was glad to have been able to undertake that one last, critical defense of the Empire.

"We're going to a private dock," Cyrillian explained as she directed their ship toward the highest and most empty pylon.

"Keeping things secret?" Phennir asked. His tone was slightly joking but his intent serious.

She simply nodded and took them in.

A squadron of stormtroopers was there to meet them after they'd docked. Cyrillian marched between the two columns of white-armored soldiers, giving them just an acknowledging nod. Phennir fell in after her, and the soldiers after him.

"You're clearly a familiar face," he told her. "How long have you and Flennic been on such good terms?"

"The One-Eighty-First has been stationed at Yaga Minor for the better part of five years, Turr. Naturally I'd have to make friends."

Cyrillian, for all her skill as a soldier, had always had a certain political competency Phennir never had. More than once, he'd urged Baron Fel to simply overthrow Pestage, Isard, and all the other fools who'd started pillaging the Empire as soon as Palpatine was dead. Once Phennir had taken command of the 181st he'd understood how naive he'd been, how ignorant he was to the complexities of managing an interstellar empire. He hadn't wanted to understand them either; he'd always been a soldier, and never once wanted to be an administrator.

Cyrillian, apparently, had. She got through several more layers of security with a few easy nods to the guards before she finally led Phennir into a conference room with a broad viewport looking down on the planet.

Seated at the end of the table was Kurlen Flennic. While Pellaeon had retained a certain square-shouldered, white-haired elegance in his twilight years, Moff Flennic had grown bald and fat. Dark liver-spots marked hands that looked withered and bony compared to the sagging bulge of his torso. Jowls hung like melted candle-wax down the edges of his face. However, there was no mistaking the intensity in his small dark eyes.

"I'm glad you could join us, General Phennir," Flennic said. His voice was still strong too.

"General Cyrillian made an enticing case," Phennir said as he took a seat at Flennic's right shoulder. Cyrillian took a spot on his left.

“Yes, I hoped your old, ah, subordinate could persuade you.”

Without glancing at Cyrillian, Phennir folded his hands on the table-top and told Flennic, “She got me to come here and speak with you. I haven’t been persuaded of anything yet.”

“But you understand what we’re doing here, don’t you?”

“Frankly, no, I don’t. She says you’re putting together a military force.”

“One to defend us against Alliance attacks.”

Everyone kept assuming that elements of the Alliance, rogue or sanctioned, were behind the convoy attacks. Pellaeon admitted it was likely, but he wanted proof.

“How is this force being organized? Is it being staged somewhere? Or are you just gathering loyal commanders?”

“For now, loyal commanders.”

“For *now*. And then what? You know Pellaeon’s returned from the Core.”

“Of course I know. He just gave a speech at Bastion, to the Moff Council.”

Phennir hadn’t heard that bit. “*You* are part of that Council, aren’t you?”

“I told Pellaeon to come see me. I said I’m busy coordinating the defense of our territory against unprovoked aggression. I was being more honest than he knows.”

“Are these loyal captains of yours taking part in maneuvers now?”

“Some. Others are at Yaga Minor, or elsewhere.”

“What happens when the source of these attacks is identified? Pellaeon’s not a dawdler and he’s not a fool. He’ll move against the attackers fast, whoever they are.”

“You assume the source *will* be identified.”

“It has to be eventually. And you didn’t answer my question. This fleet you’re building, this network, is it to move against the Alliance? Or are you planning a coup against Pellaeon?”

Now that he'd finally come out and said it, an awkward pall fell over the room. He glanced at Cyrillian for the first time since the conversation began; she averted her eyes.

"If the culprits of these attacks do prove to be Alliance, we can't be sure Pellaeon will react accordingly," Flennic said. "They'll try to blame it on rogue elements, and he'll eat those excuses. He trusts them too much. He's been in the Core for too long. You were just there, for that funeral, weren't you? Didn't you see it?"

Phennir mind flicked back. It seemed much longer than a week ago. He and Pellaeon had hovered close to each other after the ceremony but, for the most part, Pellaeon had done the talking and Phennir had done the watching.

What he'd seen had quietly disturbed him: an Imperial Grand Admiral talking easily with easy respect to his subhuman allies; a man who seemed more at home in his adopted environment than in the society in which he'd been raised.

"Pellaeon does have the best interests of the Empire at heart," Phennir said. He believed that, against all else. Alien-lover or no, Pellaeon was still a man of honor.

"Yes, but he's not *wholly* Imperial anymore, is he?"

That was such a simple way of saying things, but it was accurate.

Cyrillian spoke up for the first time. "Pellaeon believes we need to integrate into the Alliance, Turr, but he's wrong. If we do that we'll dissolve in their waters. We'll lose everything we've been fighting for. Everything they all died for."

He thought of all the stone monument on Bastion, all those names carved in white letters: Avrian, Damkin, Devis, so many more. He thought of that woman with the son who was growing up in peace.

"We can't just start a whole new war against the Alliance," Phennir insisted.

"We *won't*," Flennic insisted. "But we can pull our ships back into our territory, fortify the border, and *hold*. The

Alliance is doomed anyway. All those bickering aliens will tear themselves apart in time.”

That’s what they’d said about the old Rebel Alliance too, and the New Republic. During the Vong War it looked like that prediction was finally coming true, but when the dust had settled all the fractured systems across the galaxy seemed more united than ever. Phennir was still amazed and incredulous.

He had to cut to the heart of it. Phennir asked, “Do you plan to overthrow Pellaeon? Yes or no?”

With equal directness, Flennic said, “If he refuses to hold the Alliance accountable for their crimes, yes.”

“Define accountable.”

“If he doesn’t withdrawal all cooperation and fortify the border.”

The grand admiral that Phennir had watched at Bel Iblis’ funeral would never do that. He was too entangled in the Alliance web.

If was no longer a question. Phennir felt something heavy fall over him. He asked, “*How?*”

“With the forces I’ve arranged, we can make him stand down,” Flennic said.

“Can you really? What if he tries to fight? There are many captains loyal to him, personally.”

“The critical thing about any coup is that it has to be over and done with before anyone realizes it has happened.”

Coup. That word piled more weight on Phennir’s chest.

Cyrillian said, “We can draw Pellaeon to a remote location, then seize him.”

“Seize him with *what*? He brought *Megador* with him.” Phennir paused, thought. “*Dominion*? Do you have-”

Flennic shook his head. “I didn’t even attempt that one. Captain Ardifff has always been loyal to Pellaeon. That was why I sent him to patrol the border.”

“Then how to you plan to deal with *Megador*?”

Something wordless passed between Flennic and Cyrillian. It seemed like neither was willing to speak.

Then, with impeccable timing, the comlink pinned to Flennic's chest started buzzing. With those spidery spotted hands, he picked it up and held it to his mouth. "This is Moff Flennic. Report."

Phennir was close enough to hear a tinny voice say, "Sir, there's been another convoy attack."

Breath caught in Phennir's chest. Flennic's sagging face twisted. "Damn. Where?"

"Just outside our border, sir. En route from Ord Trasi to Muunilinst."

"And where was *Dominion*?"

"Down by Borosk, sir."

"Damn," the old Moff repeated. "Do we have people on the scene?"

"Yes, sir. Alliance surveyors have yet to arrive. We've already started to gather material from the wreckage. *Dominion* is on its way."

"Is there anything to gather this time?"

"Possibly, sir. We're getting reports now."

"Excellent. I'll be at ops in five minutes." Flennic switched off the comlink. His dark little eyes fell right on Phennir.

"I'll come with you," he said. It was impossible to say anything else.

When they got to the station's control deck, barely anyone seemed to notice the famed old ex-general walking alongside Flennic in his hovering repulsor-chair. The men and woman were all clearly distraught by the newest attack, this one right on the edge of Imperial space.

Phennir joined Flennic and Cyrillian at the central station, where a young lieutenant informed them that while there were no survivors from this attack, some of the ships were more intact than in the previous cases.

"They probably didn't want to stay close to the border long," Phennir suggested.

"Or they're getting overconfident," Flennic clacked his tongue. "Sloppy."

The lieutenant listened to his earpiece, then said, "Sirs, it seems they've recovered a visual recording from one of the ships."

"Can they send it?" asked Cyrillian.

"It's transmitting now, sir. Visual only."

The lieutenant flipped a few switches, and suddenly a hologram blazed to life in the middle of the room. All the tense, scampering crew stopped to stare at it. Phennir barely noticed; he couldn't take his eyes away.

The holo showed the bridge of a mid-sized freighter, ad the stars beyond. Crewmen scampered soundlessly in the foreground and explosions burst beyond the viewport. Suddenly it drifted into view: the long, lumpy, instantly-recognizable shape of a Mon Calamari cruiser.

The cruiser began firing. The camera shook. Crewmen fell to the deck. There was flash of light, and a burst of static.

The holo flickered off. No one spoke. Phennir looked sidelong to see Cyrillian's face tight and paled with anger.

"I'm with you," he said, so quiet it could barely be heard, even by Cyrillian or Flennic.

But it didn't matter. They already knew.

Teren Rogriss lived in a small but well-appointed villa some fifty kilometers outside Adumar's capital. The rolling hills surrounding it were all cultivated for farming but Rogriss' place was walled off from the other properties.

A protocol droid ushered Tycho's speeder through the gate, then led him down a meandering pathway surrounded by trees and flowers. Finally, it bade Tycho to sit down in the waiting room of the ex-admiral's villa. It was modestly but tastefully furnished in Adumari fashion with undecorated white walls that amplified the warmth of afternoon sunlight spilling in from the garden.

It was, Tycho thought, just the kind of place he'd like to spend his waning years in.

When Rogriss arrived a few minutes later, his spirits fell. He came in a repulsor-chair that cradled a thin body half-

covered in blankets. Rogriss had lost a lot of weight and most of his hair. Tired bags drooped beneath his eyes.

Tycho got to his feet and tried to hide his shock with a quick salute. "Admiral Rogriss, it's good to see you again."

Rogriss at least had the strength to raise one bony hand up for a return salute. As Tycho sat down, he nudged his repulsor-chair closer and said, "I'm sorry to see you in such a state, but I rarely look better than this nowadays."

"It's perfectly alright," Tycho said with a bland smile, wondering what specific illness had wasted Rogriss away but dead-set against actually asking.

"It's all Tuvyan's Syndrome." The old admiral could read him well. "Runs in the family. A degenerative neural disorder. No good cure for it."

"Ah." Tycho couldn't say anything else.

"Forget about that right now." Rogriss waved a bony hand and regarded Tycho with those sunken eyes. "You know, I'm not sure if we've ever actually met one-on-one, Celchu. With Wedge Antilles, yes, and your friend, ah, Garik Loran, but you? I don't think so. So I have to wonder why you came all the way out here to see me."

"Technically, I came to Adumar with the Alliance reinforcements. You've heard about the attacks on Imperial convoys?"

Rogriss' head bobbed. "It sounds very nasty."

Tycho wondered whether he meant the attacks themselves, the political mess they'd set off, or both. "I'm here to address those issues, but I also wanted to talk to you about something."

"Something related? I haven't had any contact with my old, ah, friends for over two decades. I had to have special security follow me around everywhere for *years* because they kept threatening to assassinate me after my, ah, defection."

"This isn't about the convoy attacks. At least, I hope it isn't."

"You're just making me more confused, Celchu."

He considered just how much to tell Rogriss. Niathal and Kalenda might not agree, but he couldn't picture the man as a security threat. This villa, nice as it was, felt hollow and emptied; he probably hadn't talked to anyone besides his protocol droid in days, maybe weeks.

"Admiral, what can you tell me about a man named Temius Holt?"

Rogriss frowned. "He must be dead by now."

"He's not. On the way to Adumar, I had a conversation with Wedge Antilles' wife. You might have met her. She was a spook and worked the NRI end of our operation here back in the day."

"What did Antilles' wife tell you about Holt?"

"Well, it's a long story, so I'll try to simplify. Basically, Iella has friends in CorSec, the Corellian system's local police force. They helped us identify a certain freighter of interest. It runs a bunch of different transponders but we're pretty sure it's been flying secret missions for Thrackan Sal-Solo, the Five Worlds' defense minister."

"I know who Sal-Solo is. I saw his stupid speech after Bel Iblis' funeral. What does any of this have to do with an Imperial intelligence agent from thirty years ago?"

"Well, once we got a tentative ID on Sal-Solo's point man, Iella's contact in CorSec told us that said point man had recently been spotted talking to Temius Holt, formerly Imperial Intelligence, now freelance information dealer based on Duro."

"Intra-government intrigue is fascinating, but I don't see what this has to do with me."

"What can you tell me about Holt? I understand that you and he worked together when you were part of Grand Moff Kaine's Pentastar Alignment."

"We did. I didn't trust him at all. Kaine only did to a point. He worked for Teradoc after Kaine and he wasn't loyal to anything except fame and influence. When those weren't enough he quit Imperial service and started working for credits. That was the same time Pellaeon put all the pieces

back together again and tried to flush out all the personnel who weren't, ah, appropriate for his reformed Empire."

"So he worked for Teradoc, in the Deep Core? Do you know anything about that?"

"Not really." Rogriss shrugged. "I was based at Orinda or Agamar for most of that period in the Mid Rim. I didn't even fight in the reborn Emperor's campaigns."

"So you don't know about any research stations Teradoc might have had in the Deep Core? Any shipyards?"

"I know a little," Rogriss allowed. "You know Pellaeon and Daala went around and ransacked every Deep Core warlord base they could find once Teradoc and the others died. They got *Megador* and *Dominion* from Harrsk and *Night Hammer* from Delavardus."

"Did they get anything from Teradoc or the others?"

He considered a moment. "Not that I recall. He might not have had the right hardware. I know he was running a whole fleet of nothing but old *Victory*-class destroyers. Pellaeon was in charge of that. Of course, Teradoc was always big on secrets, even more than the other warlords."

"So, Holt might have been privy to information no one else knew, not even Pellaeon?"

Rogriss sighed. "What kind of information do you have in mind, Celchu?"

"Does the Lyor System ring a bell?"

Those sallow eyes blinked. "Vaguely. I think it was in Teradoc's territory."

"Well, we think Holt sent the Corellians off to the Lyor System, but if he did, it was on a wild bantha chase. There was some kind of facility there, but it was destroyed three years ago."

"Three?" Rogriss echoed. "That's quite... recent."

"If there was something at Lyor, why didn't Holt give it to Pellaeon?" Tycho thought out loud.

"They didn't like each other. At *all*. Holt probably thought he could sell the information to someone else and get a better value for it."

“But that was decades ago. Why would he finally be selling the location to the Corellians *now*?”

“I don’t know. Maybe he couldn’t find anyone willing to pay what he asked for. Maybe he thought his information wasn’t really that valuable. Did you talk to your, ah, friend’s friend in CorSec? Can’t they arrest him, or bring him in for questioning?”

“I told you, he’s normally based on Duro. I already passed this on to Alliance Intelligence. They might be able to get the drop on Holt, but they might not. After his deal with the Corellians went bust, he might have decided to, ah, relocate for his own safety.”

“Maybe it was a fix-er-upper,” Rogriss muttered.

“Excuse me?”

“When Pellaeon found *Dominion* and *Megador*, they were both in bad shape. You can see all the refitting he had to do to *Megador*, the engines he had to add, all of that. We ended up scavenging Harrsk’s old cruiser, *Illthmar’s Fist*, just to get the other two up and running.”

It was what Tycho’s thoughts had been dancing around for days, what he’d been too scared to get close to. “So you think there might have been *another* ship at Lyor, a big ship, a ship Holt thought was worth a ton of credits? Something as big as *Megador* or *Night Hammer*?”

His head lolled back and forth. “You’re putting words in my mouth. This is all speculation...”

Rogriss trailed off. Something in his eyes seemed to look back through the decades, searching for something, maybe an ethereal strand of half-forgotten memory.

Tycho waited patiently for about a minute before asking, “Did Holt tell you something, Admiral? Is that it?”

The old man’s mouth hinged open, like he was about to speak. Then Tycho’s comlink buzzed in his pocket.

He swore. He wanted to just ignore it and get on with questioning Rogriss, but he remembered telling the destroyer in orbit that he was to be contacted only in the case of severe emergencies.

He quickly excused himself and stalked out into the garden. He thumbed on the comlink and said, "This is General Celchu. What is it?"

"General, there's been another attack." He recognized the voice of Kral Nevil, ex-rogue and now the destroyer *Diadem's* captain. "This one was right by the Imperial border, near Muunilinst."

He'd been expecting another attack, but the timing couldn't have been worse. "Have we scouted the site yet?"

"The Imperials got there first, sir. They're blocking a pair of Bothan ships attempting to access the site."

He could hear the anxiety in Nevil's voice. Tempers were rising far too fast. "We need to convince them we aren't a threat."

"That's, ah, not very likely, sir."

"Why not?"

"It appears the Imperials have footage of the attack from one of the wrecked vessels. It shows a Mon Cal cruiser firing on an Imperial ship."

Tycho felt weak at the knees, dizzy in the head. He steadied himself before losing balance and asked, "Has Pellaeon responded? Niathal?"

"The admiral's ordered all Alliance ships in the area to pull closer to the border. She wants to assure the Imperials we're protecting them."

"They're going to get the exact *opposite* idea."

"I, ah, sir, I think she wants to try and secure the area in case the attacks are still out there somewhere."

Space was too big. There were too many places to hide.

"General, we've been ordered to leave at once."

Tycho restrained a curse and glanced back at the entry to Rogriss' villa. He could still see the man's shrunken shape through the window.

"Go without me, Captain Nevil."

"Sir, I—"

"That's an order. Niathal sent me to Adumar to investigate the attack in this system. That's still what I'm doing. *You*

are to follow the admiral's further orders to the letter, but *I* am staying here. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir. Of course, sir." Nevil knew his old commander better than to argue.

"Then go now." Before turning off his comlink, he added, "And please, stay *safe*, Kral."

He stuffed the comlink back into his pocket and tried to wrap his mind around the sudden escalation. If there was some rogue Alliance fleet out there attacking Imperial convoys- and it damned sure sounded like it now- then the awkward cooperation both sides had been building for the past decade were instantly broken. It could even lead to another war, only this was wouldn't be *his* to fight. It would belong to Syal and Myri and all the other kids whose parents had fought for them to grow up in a galaxy at peace.

No, not just *could*. It almost certainly *would*. The bad blood on both sides of the Imperial-Alliance divide was still strong, even after all this time.

He looked back at the window, saw Rogriss still there. He marched back into the villa, praying that whatever the admiral had to say might avert what now looked inevitable.

As soon as word had come down of the attack near Muunilinst, Pellaeon had returned to *Megador* and set course. Admiral Reige had insisted on accompanying him, though given the circumstances, her reunion with her son was not a pleasant one.

The mood soured further when they arrived at the location of the attack. Two star destroyers from Yaga Minor sat between the field of slowly drifting debris and the two smaller Bothan cruisers the Alliance had sent to the site. Clearly, Flennic was attempting to block their access to the debris. Captain Ardifff had brought *Dominion* as well, and the seven-kilometer-long vessel sat on the other side of the Bothan ships, effectively boxing them in.

Megador dwarfed even *Dominion*. It cut like a white sword into the space between Flennic's destroyers and the

Bothan ships; if anyone was going to start shooting first, it would be them.

Pellaeon doubted if the Bothans knew that or cared. He sent an immediate message to them first, telling them to hold their position or be fired upon. After that he sent Ardiffe a brief message, telling him to hold *Dominion* where it was and not open fire unless directly ordered to do so.

Then he turned his attention to Flennic.

"We have all the proof we need here." The old Moff looked irate even over the shrunken blue holo-image. "The rebels destroyed *another* convoy. We *know* this!"

"All I saw was a Mon Cal ship on the holo you sent me, Kurlen. We have no idea whether these Bothans were involved."

"What do you suggest then? Just let them go?"

"That's *exactly* what I suggest, but first, I'm calling a conference on *Megador*."

His face twisted into a sneer. "The Empire is under *attack*! This is no time for a conference!"

"I am trying to avert a *war*, Kurlen, a war we *cannot* win."

"You've spent too long in the Core with all those—"

"You have fifteen minutes to come to *Megador*," Pellaeon said. "Be there."

He flipped the holo off. He took a deep breath to see the Reiges, mother and son, standing behind him in the doorway to his personal salon.

The resemblance struck him instantly. Despite all the stress and shock, he allowed himself to wonder how many times the three of them had been together in the same room. There had probably been only a handful, but if they really were a family in the blood sense, then it was still more than he'd ever gotten with Hallena and Mynar Devis.

As he stared at them, unspeaking, something welled in his throat. After so much attrition, he was looking at the only family he had left. In losing Mynar during the Vong War he'd lost a piece of himself forever. But these two, even if Vitor *wasn't* his blood son, had become more precious to

him than anything else, so quietly that he'd barely even noticed until they were staring him in the face.

He cleared his throat and said to Vitor, "Call the Bothans. Tell them to send one representative here within fifteen minutes. Assure them that no harm will come to them."

The look on Vitor's face gave no confidence, but he nodded, and quickly left.

For a long moment, Pellaeon and Molgarin Reige stared at each other across the room. Then Pellaeon said, "I want a full sensor sweep of this area. I'm particularly interested in residual exhaust that we can analyze."

He could tell Reige was angry, at the rebels, the attackers, and him, but she still understood his meaning. "We might not be able to identify exhaust from a Mon Cal engine, not if it was part of a larger fleet."

"Just let me see it. Please."

"I'll get it immediately," she said, but didn't move.

"What else?"

"Gilad, what do you plan to do with those Bothans?"

"I intend to give them a copy of our sensor data and send them on their way."

"You can't be serious."

"Whatever happened here had nothing to do with those Bothans. If they were involved in the attack in any way they wouldn't just rush back to the scene of the crime."

"And what of the people who sent *them*?"

Pellaeon didn't believe Niathal was involved, not directly. He wasn't sure if he trusted her anymore, but he couldn't believe she'd try anything this dis-honorable.

Whether she'd cooperate after this was, unfortunately, another issue entirely.

"Molgarin, please," he said.

She nodded slightly. "I'll be at your... conference."

"Good. We'll be meeting on K-deck."

Reige nodded one more time and left. Pellaeon suddenly felt his strength leave him; he sagged to one side and had to brace himself against a wall to keep upright.

And to think just a week ago he'd been sure he'd die in bed, in peacetime, like Bel Ibis, Nantz, Ackbar, Dodonna and all those other lucky rebels.

He should have known he wouldn't be so lucky. His own son hadn't.

When he was sure he was steady, he walked straight to the conference room. Four stormtrooper bodyguards fell in silently behind him, following him the whole way. He tried to walk straight and steady for their sakes, though his mind and body still felt submerged in awful possibilities.

He got to the conference room on K-deck just as Flennic and the Bothan captain were docking. Admiral Reige was already there; she had a data-rod in her hand.

He took it carefully. "What do we have?"

"Mostly KDY exhaust signatures," she said, "But some that may indicate Mon Cal vessels."

Somehow he'd been hoping for something different. His body sunk into the chair at the table's end. He felt like he'd never have the strength to move again.

Flennic arrived shortly thereafter, along with a brown-and-white-furred Bothan who tersely introduced himself as Captain Saiv'tu.

When everyone was seated, Pellaeon placed the datarod on the table and pushed it toward Saiv'tu. It rolled until it met the Bothan's outstretched paws.

"Those are *Megador's* analyses of the battle zone," he said. "It confirms what we've already suspected, including the presence of a Mon Cal cruiser."

Saiv'tu's claws tightened on the datarod. "I'd like to see this visual recording also."

"We'll send it to your ship once you return."

"So we *are* allowed to return, are we?"

"Take them back to Admiral Niathal. Tell her I await her response."

Saiv'tu nodded but said nothing else.

"What about the rebel ships encircling our border?" Flennic asked.

Still looking at the Bothan, Pellaeon said, "I expect Admiral Niathal to pull her forces back. No Alliance warships within five parsecs of our border. Until further notice. Is that understood?"

Saiv'tu nodded again. He was clearly in well over his head and knew it. All the Bothan wanted was to get out of this meeting alive.

"Very well. You may go, Captain."

"Don't you at least want an explanation?" Flennic snarled. "An apology? Anything?"

"We know *nothing* about what happened here," Saiv'tu insisted. "We were on patrol near Ord Trasi when we got an Imperial distress call. We only wanted to help."

Pellaeon believed him; he looked too scared to be lying.

"Captain Saiv'tu, you may go now. Return to your ship; I'll tell ours to stand down in a moment. Moff Flennic, Admiral Reige, please stay."

The Bothan nodded one last time, then walked out of the room as quickly as he could without breaking into a panicked sprint.

As soon as the door slid shut, Flennic hissed, "That's all? *That's* how you respond to an assault on our sovereignty?"

"I believe the Bothan was not involved."

"The Alliance just declared *war* on us! That was the enemy!"

"Right now, we're likely looking at a rogue Alliance fleet, not a full-blown invasion."

"How do you know? Because that fish friend of yours told you so?"

"I haven't spoken with Admiral Niathal since I left for Bastion," he said firmly. "However, I very much intend to hear her explanation of this. She'll be held to account."

In truth, he'd half-suspected that Flennic himself was staging these attacks in order to break the relationship between the Empire and the Alliance. The holo-cam footage of the Mon Cal cruiser could have been faked, but he couldn't argue with Reige's sensor data.

“What if Niathal continues to deny Alliance involvement?” Reige asked.

It was a question he didn’t have an answer to. Flennic was just the face of the mass of Imperial citizens who’d want not only a full withdrawal from the Alliance coalition but retaliatory strikes against any vulnerable target that would satisfy their personal hunger for revenge.

“We can’t afford to get into a war with the Alliance,” Pellaeon said firmly. “We risk losing what little we have left.”

“We need justice for our dead,” Reige said simply.

“We need to fortify our borders at once,” Flennic insisted. “We need to send ships to all major crossing point in and out of Imperial space.”

Pellaeon shook his head. “You’d put thousands of angry soldiers with itchy trigger fingers close to Alliance ships.”

“They won’t be close if Niathal withdraws like you requested,” Reige said.

“No. I don’t want this to spiral out of control.”

“Then what?” growled Flennic, “You just let the rebels cut straight into our territory?”

“No. We’ll disperse our fleet, guard key worlds *near* the border but not the border itself.”

“They could slip halfway to Bastion before we’d even notice.”

“The Alliance is not trying to invade us, Kurlen.”

“You’ve been blinded by your alien friends,” the old Moff snarled. “You’ve let that Supreme Commander rank go to your head. Your first oath, your *real* oath, is to protect the Empire!”

“My first oath was to the Old Republic,” Pellaeon corrected. “I promised I’d keep the peace, protect law and order. I’ve followed that oath no matter *what* government I’ve served.”

“There has to be a compromise,” Reige interjected.

“Like what?” sneered Flennic.

Reige looked directly at Pellaeon. "Grand Admiral, send *Dominion* to patrol the border along Muunilinst. You trust Captain Ardiff, don't you?"

He'd trusted the man with *Chimaera* for years. Pellaeon nodded.

She leaned a little closer. "And please, let me take one ship, it doesn't matter which. I'll patrol the border near Adumar. Together we should be able to detect any Alliance ships crossing into our space."

"What about the rest of the fleet?" asked Flennic, surly and reluctant but no longer adamant.

"We scatter those out to protect major worlds," Pellaeon said, before Flennic could object again, he added, "I will personally station *Megador* at Yaga Minor. Your world will not be at risk, Kurlen."

"My concern is the Empire as whole."

"So is mine. I've made my decision."

Flennic shook his head. "You're being a fool."

"We have nothing else to discuss. You can go now."

Flennic slowly pushed his repulsor-chair away from the table and drifted out of the room. It should have been a relief to have him gone, but right now he was the smallest of Pellaeon's problems.

"Thank you," he told Reige. "You defused the situation a little, I think."

"Are you sure you don't want to reinforce the border?"

"I meant what I said. Put our boys on that line and you're asking for some itchy trigger finger to start a war."

"And what about Niathal? The Alliance? When they comm you and tell you they have no idea what's going on, will you believe them?"

He didn't have an answer to that. He liked Niathal, respected her, but they'd come from opposite sides of a line that trust might never be able to cross. He already knew that she didn't fully trust him.

But then he remembered Tycho Celchu. When he thought of that one, another old soldier, he couldn't muster a doubt.

“Molgarin,” he said, “Have you looked into Lyor?”

The woman blinked, clearly surprised by the sudden shift in topic. “Only superficially. With everything that’s come up—”

“What did you find?”

“Not much. There were indications that Teradoc was using it as a research facility, but it was supposedly abandoned before the cloned Emperor died.”

Pellaeon fought a frown. He’d served under Teradoc for a time, captaining a group of *Victory*-class star destroyers, but he’d never heard of any base on Lyor. Of course, Teradoc had been a man of many secrets, ones he’d never share with a man he’d viewed as disposable.

“Clearly those reports were inaccurate,” he said.

“I suppose so.” She frowned. “At the moment, I think we have bigger problems than some old research station.”

It was the kind of casual dismissal he hadn’t expected from her, a woman who usually considered every option, no matter how small. The stress was getting even to her.

“I understand. I just wanted to check.”

“I’d like to try to catch up with Flennic, sir. See which destroyer I can wrangle out of him for the patrol.”

“Of course. If you need anything else from *Megador*, let me know.”

“Gladly.” She moved for the door, paused, lingered looking back at him.

“I thought you were in a hurry.”

“Of course.” She smiled a little, sadly. “It’s a little like old times, isn’t it Gil?”

No, it wasn’t. The galaxy had changed and they’d changed. “For Vitor’s sake, I hope it’s not.”

She nodded, turned, and left.

He sank back in his chair. He didn’t know if he had the strength to rise. He was almost ninety now, far too old for yet another war, far too old to lose the few people he cared about still left.

But the galaxy didn't care what he wanted. He'd learned that one a long time back. He picked up his comlink, thumbed it on, and told Vitor Reige to cast the captives free.

Phennir and Cyrillian were there to meet Kurlen Flennic when his shuttle returned to the orbital station from *Megador*. The old Moff descended the landing ramp with help of a repulsor-chair. His face was set in an unhappy scowl, as Phennir had been expecting. He braced himself to find out just how bad things were.

"Well, sir?" Cyrillian asked, impatient. "How did the grand admiral respond?"

"As you'd expect," Flennic sneered. "We're to fortify major planets, but *not* the border. He's afraid of itchy trigger fingers and thinks the rebels aren't going to invade."

"They've already come damned close," Phennir said.

"Pellaeon still trusts his alien friends on Coruscant. He thinks this is some rogue operation, that they'll help him find the perpetrators and bring them to justice."

"Justice is something you take for yourself," Cyrillian said, "Or you don't get it at all."

"Well, it's a good thing we're ready to take it, aren't we?" Flennic smiled, bearing yellowed teeth.

"What exactly do we plan to do now?" Phennir asked. It took effort to reign in his anger at this most recent attack, at Pellaeon's complacent trust in his old enemies.

Another one of those looks passed between Cyrillian and Flennic. Phennir said, "You can trust me. I am committed to this, I promise. I'll help you in this however you want."

"I'm glad to hear it, Turr." Cyrillian placed a hand on his shoulder. "The One-Eighty-First will be glad to have you back."

"You've got allies outside Yaga Minor, ones we can meet with, use for a launching site?"

"Oh, yes."

"It won't be easy to move the whole wing without anyone noticing."

"I've already been sending squads out on long-range patrols in their Defenders. There's only two squads stationed at Yaga Minor right now. I can send them off in two patrols, spaced out over a few hours. No one will question it."

Phennir hadn't been inside a TIE Defender, or any other fighter cockpit, in years. "I'm not sure how much good I can do for you behind a control stick. My reflexes aren't what they used to be."

"It doesn't matter," said Flennic. "We have other things planned for you, General."

Phennir glanced at the old man in his repulsor chair. "What kind of things?"

"For what we're doing, we need a *face*." Cyrillian squeezed his shoulder a little tighter. "Many people in the Empire still love Pellaeon, despite his faults. He's a hero. We need a hero of our own."

He looked away, uncomfortable. "I never tried to be a hero. I just tried to fight rebels."

"That's exactly why we need you," said Flennic. "You're not tainted by politics. You're a soldier, through and through. People admire you for it, and they'll admire *us* once you join us."

"So you just want me to be a face on a poster, then? A puppet?"

"Oh, no, Turr," Cyrillian's voice went husky. "We have something much more special planned for you. A command of your own."

"A command of *what*?"

"You'll see soon." She smiled an honest, beautiful smile. "You've needed a war, soldier. We've got one for you."

Cha Niathal had fought a long line of engagements against the Empire and the Yuuzhan Vong, as everything from a gunnery ensign to an admiral, but she felt that the most challenging battle of her career was right in front of her, waiting on the winking light of her office's transponder.

Without hesitation, she punched the controls. Grand Admiral Pellaeon's holographic image sprung to life in front of her.

"Grand Admiral." She inclined her head slightly. "Thank you very much for calling."

Pellaeon skipped all formalities. "You won't like what I have to say."

"I'm aware of that. But I'm glad we can still talk to each other like civilized beings."

"I let your two Bothan ships go."

"I know. I appreciate that."

His holo-image stared at her in stony silence, waiting for more.

"I promise," she said, "I have no knowledge of any rogue elements in the Alliance who would attack Imperial civilians."

"Have or *had*?"

"Have. At this moment, I'm not certain *any* Alliance ships were behind the attack."

A scowl tightened Pellaeon's face. "What is there to deny?"

"Sir, we've analyzed all sensors scans of the battle taken by the Bothan ships. None of them picked up any trace of fuel exhaust we'd associate with a warship of Mon Calamari design. Everything points to vessels of Kuati origin, just like in the previous attacks."

His eyes showed surprise but he kept it out of his voice. "My sources have assured me there *was* a Mon Cal vessel present at the attack."

Well, that was interesting. "Do you trust those sources, Grand Admiral?"

"Very much."

"Well, in that case you should know I've also set my asset tracking people to work. As you know, no two Mon Calamari warships are exactly the same. They're analyzing the footage from the attack now. They should be able to positively identify the attacking vessel within a few hours."

“You’re asking me to trust your people. Frankly, Admiral, you’re asking a great deal right now.”

“Sir, have I ever done anything to make you doubt my honor?”

To her surprise, he didn’t respond. The scowl just tightened his face even more.

“Naturally, we are looking at other possibilities,” she said, “Including a rouge Alliance element. Asset tracking is on that, too.”

“And what happens if they do, in fact, realize that rogue ships have been slaughtering Imperial civilians?”

“All commanders and crew of those ships will be dealt with.”

“By whom? The Alliance military, or the Galactic Empire?”

His tone was quiet and measured, but she’d never seen him this angry. “I’m not legal expert. That can be determined later. But if, by some small chance, the perpetrators *are* Alliance, they will be dealt with. I’ll give them no special favors. I’ll see that justice is properly and impartially handed out.”

He regarded her carefully. “You’re saying it comes down to trust, then.”

“Trust has always been the basis for this coalition.”

He blew out breath through his nose. “You should also know, Admiral, that I’ve pulled most of our ships away from the border. Aside from a few patrol ships, under commanders I *do* trust, I’ve scattered our fleet to individual planets.”

He wanted to avoid a confrontation, a chance for tensions to flare and for the situation to spiral even more out-of-control than it already was. He was also, potentially, leaving his border open for an offensive thrust by the Second Fleet now marshaled at the edges of Imperial space.

She said, “I appreciate your trust in *me*, Grand Admiral.”

He grunted. “The... value of that trust will be decided very soon, I think.”

“As you’re still Supreme Commander, I’ve acceded to your order to keep my ships outside five parsecs of the Imperial border. They’ll still stay close, in constant patrol, unless I personally find cause to move them further in. I’m still hoping we can catch the perpetrator somewhere. I promise you, sir, I will do everything I can to keep our coalition together.”

He didn’t say he believed her, or that he’d do the same. He just said, “You should be glad you’re dealing with me, Admiral. There are many in the Empire who wouldn’t even give you this chance.”

“Believe me, I’m well aware of that. Can we make provisions to speak again?” She wanted to do everything possible to keep communication lines open and flowing.

Pellaeon considered. “How long did you say it would take to identify the Mon Cal cruiser?”

“Give me three hours.” She hoped nothing would happen to spark a war in that short window, but nothing was certain anymore.

“Very well,” he nodded. “Three hours.”

Then the holo winked out. Cha Niathal stared at the dark space where Pellaeon had been and wondered if they’d ever talk again.

The next call came after Gilad Pellaeon had retreated to his personal cabin, laid down on his bunk without removing his uniform, and closed his eyes. He’d felt sleep slowly rising up to claim him when the buzzing started, his tired brain refused to believe Niathal was calling already. He was ready to ignore it, but the damned thing kept buzzing and buzzing until it felt like it was digging a hole into his chest.

Without sitting up or opening his eyes, Pellaeon took the comlink in hand and said, “Report.”

“Grand Admiral,” Vitor Reige said, voice tense, “Are you all right?”

“Just tired, Captain. What is it? It hasn’t been three hours.”

“Sir, we’ve just received an emergency distress call from Admiral Reige’s ship.”

His eyes popped open. “What did it say?”

“I, ah, don’t know sir. It was very short. It just said she was under attack.”

His whole body protested as he shoved himself upright on the bed. “Do we have a source location?”

“Yes, sir, we do. Still in our territory.”

“How far away?”

“At top lightspeed, six hours.”

Six hours. Molgarin had taken a decent ship with her, an *Imperial II*-class, but these rogue rebels seemed to have a whole fleet with them. It was a miracle she’d gotten a distress call out at all; the others had all been jammed.

She’d never last six hours, but he couldn’t abandon her either. Not Molgarin Reige. She was one of the few good ones left.

“Jump us, Vitor.”

“Sir, what about -”

“Take us into hyperspace *immediately*. Put all crew on yellow alert and tell them to prepare for a combat situation.”

“Yes, sir. But what about Yaga Minor?”

Pellaeon fought a sigh. “Tell Flennic we’re responding to an emergency situation.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And tell him I’m sending *Dominion* to protect the shipyards. Then tell Ardiffe that too.”

“Yes, sir. Of course, sir.”

“We’re going to save your mother, Vitor, I promise.”

A tiny, tiny pause. “Yes, sir. Bridge, out.”

Pellaeon let the comlink fall soundlessly into his bedsheets. Half of him wanted to jump up and run to the bridge as fast as his creaky old legs would let him. The other half wanted to collapse back into his bed, curl up like a child, and hide from a galaxy that was falling apart around him.

But hiding was something he’d never done, not in sixty years of service. With effort, he swung his feet onto the

floor and stood up. Then he walked over to his personal communications station. There was one more person left to talk to, possibly the most important of all.

Etahn A'baht had ventured to the border of Imperial space out of a sense of loyalty to Been L'toth and a curiosity about what lay behind the recent convoy attacks.

It didn't take him long to wish he hadn't.

When word came down of the attack near Muunilinst, Niathal ordered all Alliance ships in the area, including the Dornean and Bothan vessels, to hold at five parsecs from the Imperial border. *Charnak* climbed up the Entralla Route from JanFathal and joined the scattered chain of heavy cruisers, star destroyers, picket ships, and corvettes that were scouting the vast wastes of space for any sign of the enemy.

In practice, this meant a good deal of waiting. *Charnak* sent out multiple reconnaissance sorties and unmanned probes, all of which turned out no trace. Whatever force was attacking those convoys was clearly a powerful one, and A'baht was starting to suspect that it had fled deep into Imperial territory, where the Alliance search parties would never find it.

It was restless work. The entire crew knew that, sooner or later, some message would strike them like a lightning bolt to announce another ambush, or an engagement between equally edgy Imperial and Alliance ships. Dorneans were not as keen on showing their emotions as humans, but A'baht could still read the signs of nervousness in *Charnak's* crew as they went about their normal duties.

He was with L'toth when *Charnak* received a high-priority message intended for the ship's commander. Fearing the worst, A'baht followed L'toth to the captain's office to retrieve the transmission. He stood off to one side while L'toth fired up to holo-projector.

To A'baht's surprise, it was a Quarren male he didn't recognize, wearing the pips of a mere captain.

“Captain L’toth, this is Captain Nevil of the star destroyer *Diadem*.”

“I read you clearly, Captain. Go ahead.”

“We’ve just received a communication from Adumar. We recently dropped General Tycho Celchu off on the planet and were ordered to leave him there and begin patrolling the border.”

“Does he need a pickup?”

“As soon as possible. However, we’ve moved a substantial distance from Adumar since then. I checked with fleet command and was told your ship was the closest. I’d do this myself, Captain, but it’s important to maintain the line’s integrity.”

“I understand completely.” L’toth inclined his head slightly. “We’ll take care of it. Thank you for asking us personally.”

“Thank you for the help. *Diadem*, out.”

And just like that, the holo flickered off.

L’toth glanced sidelong at A’baht. “You’re relieved. Don’t lie.”

“There’s not much to be relieved about. Once we swing past Adumar we’ll be right back to the front line, probably with some especially dangerous mission.”

“Do you think so?”

“If Celchu needs an immediate retrieval there has to be a reason.”

“Probably. Excuse me a moment.” L’toth fetched his comlink from his breast pocket and put in a quick call to the bridge, saying, “Lieutenant, break off from the patrol chain and set a new course for Adumar at maximum lightspeed. Yes, I said Adumar. Leave as soon as you can warm up hyperdrives. Tell our recon flights to link up with the closest ships in the chain. We’ll retrieve them later. Excellent. Thank you, lieutenant.”

Looking very much like an authority figure, young L’toth switched off his comlink, pocketed it, and turned back to A’baht.

“Well,” he said, “They keep on throwing new surprises at us, don’t they?”

“I have a feeling Celchu is going to throw the biggest one yet.”

“Do you know General Celchu well?”

“Not very, but I know his type. He may cut the respectable elder type now, Been, but he’s a fighter pilot in his bones, and fighter pilots always want to do something rash.”

“If he requested immediate retrieval, it has to be for something important.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt that...”

There was a shudder as *Charnak* jumped to hyperspace. Blue and white light flashed outside cabin the window.

“Well,” said L’toth, “At least your last joyride is a memorable one.”

A’baht just grunted, and hoped he’d stay alive to remember it.

Turr Phennir’s TIE Defender shuddered only a little as it dropped out of hyperspace. For a moment, all he saw was a broad field of black, marked by scattered pinpoints of distant light.

Then his eyes adjusted, and he saw the black sword cutting between the stars.

For a long moment his mind simply refused to comprehend the thing, even as his TIE Defender plunged toward it and its black hull swelled to block out the stars and fill his vision.

He groped for a sense of scale. This vessel seemed nearly as large as *Lusankya*, *Reaper*, and *Executor* had been, but its body was far more narrow. Then he realized how similar its long sword-like body was to that of *Megador*, though that ship had a wide aft section to accommodate additional engines, and its hull was a distinct off-white instead of midnight-black.

Then he realized he’d seen this ship before, half a lifetime ago, hovering over Annaj and offering anfleeting specter of hope to wear soldiers fleeing the disaster at Endor.

“This is *Vengeance*,” he breathed, “The original.”

“That’s right.” Cyrillian’s voice was proud in his earpiece.

“But where did it *come* from?”

“Recovered from the Deep Core three years ago, while Pellaeon was busy with Chiss and Killiks. Turns out Teradoc was working on it before he died. It took a long time to fix back into fighting shape.”

“Who found it? *How*?”

“All in good time, General.” He could hear her smile. “All fighters, follow my lead.”

Cyrillian kicked her fighter ahead and dipped it low. She angled herself toward the hangar opening along the ship’s belly. Phennir joined her, as did the ten other red-striped TIE Defenders that had come with them Yaga Minor.

When they sailed into the hangar Phennir was struck by the vastness of it. It was so like *Megador*’s in scale and design, but it was so *empty*. The only other star-fighters were attached to docking racks in the far opposite wall: three full squadrons of red-striped 181st TIE Defenders.

Phennir was quick to dismount his starfighter. He met Cyrillian on the catwalk as she pulled her helmet off, spilling dark brown hair over her shoulders.

“Magnificent, isn’t it Turr?” Her white grin shone against her tan face.

“But what *is* it?” Phennir held out one arm, as if to encompass the entire empty hangar.

“It’s our hope. This is how we hold back the rebels. This is how we restore the Empire we loved.” Her black-gloved hand grabbed his, squeezed it tight. “General Phennir, this ship is *yours*.”

PART VI: REAPER

13 ABY

Turr Phennir's TIE Defender shot out from beneath the bow of the super star destroyer *Reaper*. The twelve red-striped fighters of Blue Squadron followed him in a single line as they raced toward the asteroid belt that strung out before them.

Even without aid of his sensors he could spot the three World Devastators that were currently eating away at the mineral-rich rocks strung like a garland around the midsection of the Celanon System. They were the last three World Devastators in the galaxy (unless there were more hidden someplace in the Deep Core, which Phennir didn't discount) and they'd spent the past two months gradually nibbling at an asteroid chain that had once housed the most profitable mine in the contested Borderland Sectors that straddled the line between Empire and so-called New Republic.

Shortly after the Battle of Orinda, seeking to both consolidate his territorial gains and increase the Empire's industrial output, Admiral Pellaeon had decanted his flagship over Celanon and declared that all mining assets in the asteroid belt were hereby seized by the Empire. The natives weren't happy, but there wasn't much they could do against *Reaper*. Celanon was still a wealthy trading planet; even without the mines it would survive and maybe even thrive.

Phennir wished he could be so sure about himself. It had been almost a year since Orinda and the high had worn off.

The rebels hadn't brought *Lusankya* back into play against them but they'd been launching smaller attacks in the Borderland Regions, taking Arda and Quell, almost taking Lucazec, and inching way too close to Celanon for Phennir's liking. Leaving *Reaper* at Celanon while *Dominion* guarded Orinda and *Megador* hung back at Agamar, Pellaeon and Reige had taken a trip back to Bastion to consult with the Moffs, as if those preening governors would have valuable advice.

Phennir would still have been able to cling to the glow of post-Orinda optimism if it hadn't had been for Adumar.

In seeking to extend its influence into a system reknowned for its weapons manufacturing, the Empire had sided with Adumar's strongest nation-state in the planet's civil war. Pellaeon had sent Admiral Teren Rogriss, Phennir, and three of his best pilots to Adumar to woo the natives. The so-called Republic, attempting to win planets through diplomacy instead of terrorism, had sent Antilles, Celchu, and their two most insufferable flying friends.

Through some process Phennir still couldn't fathom, Antilles and Celchu had convinced the other nation-states on Adumar to come together on the side of the rebels. Even more incredibly, they'd convinced Teren Rogriss to betray his oath to the Empire and join the Adumari. Worst of all, they had killed all three of his pilots, including Seth Avrian, the leader of Blue Squadron.

Admiral Pellaeon had been foolishly generous, letting Phennir remain in command of the 181st after the disgrace at Adumar. His only goal left was to prove to everyone else-and himself- that he was worthy of that trust.

Phennir adjusted his pitch and led Blue Squadron on a plane above the Devastators and the asteroid belt. He checked his astro-navigation computer, double-checked the coordinates, and finally began warming up his TIE Defender's hyperdrive engines.

"Blue Squad," he called, "Assemble into flights. Pull up hyperdrive coordinates. Prepare to jump at my mark."

“Affirmative, Leader,” said the new head of Blue Squad, a kid named Seiar Damkin. He had a great natural talent for flight but he was nowhere near the officer Avrian had been. Not yet, at least. One of Phennir’s many tasks was to whip him into shape.

“Prepare to jump for the Quell system on my mark,” he said. “One. Two. Three.” Deep breath. “Mark.”

Thirteen TIE Defenders plunged into infinity, but they wouldn’t stay there for long.

They came without warning, but General Etahn A’baht wasn’t surprised when *Charnak*’s tactical officer reported that a squadron of TIE Defenders had dropped into the outer orbit of the planet Quell. The Imperials had been launching sporadic raids on the Republic forces massed at Quell and Arda on and off for weeks. They were almost fighting like rebels, with fast hit-and-run attacks designed more to unnerve the enemy than score any real tactical victory.

“What’s the nearest ship?” A’baht asked as he walked over to the tactical station.

Including his own, the Republic currently had a half-dozen capital ships strung around Quell, including two anti-starfighter DP20 gunships, the MC40 light cruiser *Noralka*, Captain Carson’s *Yakez*, and the new star destroyer *Kenobi*. It was a *Nebula*-class, the first of its kind, part of the same program that had produced Admiral Bell’s ill-fated *Endurance*. The Arda system, their other beachhead onto this part of Imperial territory, was guarded by a similarly sized force that included Admiral Sien Sovv’s flagship, *Mon Casima*.

“Looks like it’s us, sir,” the lieutenant reported.

“Lovely,” he muttered. “Is there a fighter cap patrolling nearby?”

“Is there a problem?” interrupted a voice from the entrance to the bridge.

“Another Imperial fighter patrol dropped in-system, captain,” the tactical officer said.

"I see." Been L'toth's face creased in a very wide Dornean frown. "Is there a fighter patrol nearby?"

A'baht restrained a smile. A part of him still missed *Charnak's* old captain, but after the debacle at Orinda she'd declared she'd had enough of the New Republic and gone off to help resettle Bavinyar. The son of his old friend Kiles L'toth was making an admirable replacement so far.

The tactical lieutenant put a finger against his earpiece, listened, then said, "Slingshot Squadron from *Yakez* is on cap. They're moving to intercept."

The Slingshots were A-wings, fast and nimble, but not as durable at the Empire's top fighters. A'baht said, "Scramble two squads of E-wings to help. Make sure they keep those Defenders from all ships and orbital installations."

"Yes, sir."

"General," L'toth asked, "Do you think there's more on the way?"

A'baht doubted it. In theory the Imperials might be trying to draw them off their guard and launch a major attack from another direction, but they could have done that any of the dozen or so times they'd pull his stunt recently.

"They're just trying to unnerve us, Captain," he said.

L'toth glanced at the holo and let his face settle into a frown again. "It's working."

Phennir's TIE Defender had a good long-range scanner package, and it picked up not only the A-wings, but the two E-wing squadrons on an approach vector.

"Blue Leader," he called, "Take flights one and two and engage the A-wings. Flight three, follow me."

"Understood," Damkin replied.

Damkin's eight fighters should be able to hold their own against a dozen A-wings. Taking on the E-wings with just four TIEs at his back gave Phennir the harder challenge, but frankly, he was quite ready for one.

Damkin's fighters engaged the A-wings first. Phennir left them to tangle and pushed his flight toward the new

Republic star destroyer. It had been there for the past two sorties to Quell and Reige's fleet intel people had pegged it as *Obi-Wan Kenobi*, the first of a new line that used the base basic superstructure as the carrier the rebels had lost at Orinda. The destroyer retained the basic wedge-shaped hull as a standard Impstar but melded it with curved edges more reminiscent of rebel capital ships. The bridge was low against the infrastructure instead of on a tower while the stern swelled downward.

More detailed specs were yet unknown. Phennir wanted to buzz the ship before it could scramble defenders, or before the E-wings could catch up to them.

He checked his scanners, made a quick estimate in his head, then said, "Three Flight, we have time for one pass on *Kenobi*. Arm your gun-cameras. We want to get a good look at this one."

The pilots clicked compliance without clogging up the comm line with verbal affirmations. As the destroyer looked ahead of them, she began to open fire with her cannons. Phennir threw his ship into a few spins and bounces and the flight behind him followed.

They were on the destroyer fast. Phennir ducked his fighter beneath its bow and raced along its underside. The defensive cannons on its belly spat green plasma at them but none hit. He whipped past the entrance to the hangar bay just in time for a few X-wings to spill out.

As his fighter shot past the destroyer's engine-glare, he said, "Three flight, on me. We buzz the bridge then head outbound."

He pulled his TIE Defender upward into a steep climb, then leveled out with the daggers of his solar panels stabbing toward *Kenobi*'s upper hull.

He hadn't counted on the X-wings, though. They had also pulled above *Kenobi* and were vectoring to intercept Phennir's fighters on their port flank.

"Three Flight," he called, "Intercept the pointers. Cannons only. Break port in three, two, one. Go."

They did as ordered, peeling off in perfect formation and spitting green plasma-bursts that forced the X-wings to break their own formation. Phennir watched it on his scanners but didn't break course.

He dipped low over *Kenobi*, buzzing past the sunken bridge, weaving his TIE Defender back and forth so their defensive cannons could only clip his shields.

When he raced past the ship's bow he spun toward the fight he'd missed. The X-wings had Three Flight outnumbered but they hadn't lost any yet. Phennir switched to torpedoes, locked onto one of the X-wings, and fired. A single torp lanced out and caught the pointer at the same time as it was countering a laser-blast from the TIE Defender. The projectile weapon slipped through its shields and exploded the hull.

Three Flight were professionals and nobody congratulated Phennir on his kill. That was fine; the sight of an X-wing bursting into flame was satisfying enough.

If only it could have been a Rogue. Of course, they'd never have gone down so easily.

Phennir plunged into the fray and slipped onto the tail of another X-wing. He splattered plasma against its aft shields until a blast tore through, ripping apart its top port S-foil. Rather than fight to the death, the X-wing peeled back toward *Kenobi*. Cowardly, but prudent. Everyone in this brawl knew it was nothing but a skirmish.

Phennir commed Damkin and said, "Blue Leader, report."

"Holding off the A-wings, sir. Two edges down."

"Losses?"

"None for us. Sir, those E-wings are almost on you."

Phennir checked his scanners. He'd almost forgotten them, but there they were, probably less than a minute from interception. "Blue Leader, pull your ships back. Disengage and head for Celanon."

"Understood, sir." Damkin didn't ask questions. He didn't want to lose his life or any of his pilots' lives, not for a fight like this.

Phennir switched his comm freq and called, "Three Flight, on me. We're falling back."

The pilots clicked compliance and disengaged from the X-wings. The X-wings fell back toward *Kenobi*, right in time for the E-wings to fall on Three Flight's tail and begin splattering laser-blasts on their aft shields.

Phennir's ship rattled around him as he called, "All ships, prepare to jump to hyperspace on my mark."

He checked his engines, made sure they were ready. His scanner started beeping, telling him that one of the E-wings had popped off a torp that was heading for him fast.

"Mark," he said, and all five ships jumped into hyperspace, leaving the lone torpedo to streak ahead and chase empty space.

Kenobi's Captain Whyrrryk roared something; A'baht had no idea what, but a small Basic subtitle appeared beneath her holo-image saying: "We lost one of our X-wings. Another was damaged but can be repaired."

A'baht had to lean forward and squint just to read the translation. He had no idea how Whyrrryk's crew functioned in a combat situation; maybe her ship was all manned by other Wookiees.

Farley Carson, apparently, didn't need subtitles to understand her, because he was saying, "We lost two ships from Slingshot Squadron. One pilot ejected. We lost the other."

Whyrrryk roared something else. The subtitle just read: "I'm sorry."

Carson wave a hand. "We both lost people today, Captain. At least our ships weren't damaged." His image shifted attention to A'baht. "Any word from Admiral Sovv yet?"

"Not yet. I just sent the alert a few minutes ago."

"Well, the Imps don't seem to be sending these sorties in any sort of pattern. They just want to to keep us off guard."

"Let them," A'baht said. "Nothing's going to change, not until we restart the campaign."

"Any word from Coruscant?"

"Nothing I've heard, but they speak to Sovv, not me."

A light went up on the communications console. Been L'toth, who'd been monitoring the conversation from the side, whispered, "It's the admiral."

"Excuse me," A'baht told the captains, "I've got another call."

Carson nodded. Whyrrryk roared salutations. A second later, their holograms were replaced by a single head-and-shoulders image of the Sullustan Sien Sovv.

"Admira," A'baht said, "Thank you for contacting me."

"Are there any further disturbances to report, General?" asked Sovv.

"Nothing. *Kenobi* lost one X-wings, *Yakez* two A-wings. Carson was able to recover one of the pilots."

"Did you manage to kill any of them, General?"

"I'm afraid not. According to our E-wings, they had red bloodstripes on their solar panels."

"The One-Eighty-First."

"It seems so."

The Republic's own elite fighter group was currently stationed at Arda aboard Sovv's flagship. He wondered if that might have had anything to do with the 181st's choice of targets. Of course, both Celchu and Antilles were back on Coruscant, and the Rogues weren't really the Rogues without their most famous aces.

"I'll contact Captain Klivian and tell him to put a fighter patrol out," Sovv said. "Though I don't expect anything yet."

"Any word from Coruscant?"

"Nothing's started moving yet," Sovv said ambiguously. "I'll let you know when it does. Until then, we're holding positions."

"Understood. Thank you, Admiral."

Sovv gave a little nod, and with that, the holo winked out. L'toth stepped carefully beside A'baht and asked, "Sir, when we *do* move, where do you think we'll go?"

Their attempts to stab into Lucazec and Barison had been repulsed. They didn't have any major resources on the ground at Quell or Arda either. If they wanted to pick up both fleets and charge deeper into Imperial territory, well, that was easily done, and there was one target in the Borderland Sectors that tempted more than any other.

But A'baht just said, "We'll see, Captain. This isn't the Dornean Navy. Our futures are no longer in our hands."

L'toth made a sound deep in his throat, indicating that the idea displeased him. It didn't please A'baht much either, but he'd been a soldier for a lot longer. He was used to it.

Admiral Gilad Pellaeon may have been commander of all armed forces left in the Empire, and therefore its most powerful individual citizen, but as he stood in front of the semi-circle of seated Moff's he didn't feel like it.

"I have to make this very clear," he said. "Our resources are limited. I recommend against any major offensive at this time."

Moff Kurlen Flennic, seated in the middle of the rounded table, leaned forward in his seat. "Perhaps you've forgotten, Admiral, but you have *three* super star destroyers. The rebels only have one."

"They have more vessels overall, and more material to build them," Pellaeon said. "The only major shipyards we possess are at Yaga Minor and Ord Trasi. The rebels have Bilbringi, Kuat, Rothana, Corellia, and more."

"All the more reason to press the advantage now, before their production output catches up with ours," old Moff Villim Disra said from Flennic's right side.

"Winning battles is very different from administering entire sectors," Pellaeon reminded them. "They require very different kinds of resources. I thought you, gentlemen, would be especially aware of that."

That sent some frowns rippling through the group. Before anyone could speak, someone from the far left side of the semicircle cleared his throat. Pellaeon turned his head and

looked at Drikl Lecersen, the newest member of the Moff Council and the only one without a head full of gray hairs.

"I take your point, Admiral," Lecersen said, "However, if the Empire becomes content to simply hold onto its current territory, I think we risk becoming complacent. And when we become complacent, we leave ourselves open to rebel attacks."

"Exactly," Flennic said. "The rebels are an existential threat, Admiral Pellaeon. They're rabid, and they'll stop at nothing until the Empire- everything we represent, our entire way of life- has been crushed by their so-called 'Republic.' That's why we have to strike now."

"That wasn't *quite* what I was saying," Lecersen demurred.

"It's only a limited time until the rebels launch a new offensive," Disra said. "They've been holding back ever since Orinda but they know they can't let the conflict rest that way. Their people are restless. The government knows that if they don't unite all their bickering species against a common enemy- *us*- all their subhuman tribes will start fighting one another."

"Perhaps we should find a way to sow discord among their races," another Moff suggested.

Pellaeon fought a frown. He was used to sparring with Flennic and Disra in this council, though the men themselves were far apart. Flennic was a loud, irascible blowhard; Disra was much more clever and therefore more dangerous.

And, despite the nakedness of his anti-alien prejudice, the man had a point. The government that called itself a New Republic was a motley assemblage of thousands of different civilizations, and the only thing that kept them together was the myth of the glorious, righteous resistance against Imperial tyranny, never mind the fact that even without Palpatine, the lauded Old Republic was already fracturing into dozens of corrupt pieces. This New Republic was destined to break apart too; the only question was whether the Empire would live to see the day.

Pellaeon let his gaze settle on Disra and said, "The internal politics of the rebels aren't my affair. My job is the survival of the Empire, and right now that means defense against external threats. We've already lost too many people and systems by fighting beyond our limits."

"We are the Galactic Empire!" Flennic snapped. "We *have* no limits."

Even Disra rolled his eyes at that, but it was Lecersen who said, "We *had* no limits, but that was a long time ago. Look around this table. We're the only Moff's left. All the other sectors that *used* to be represented in the Moff Council are now represented by New Republic Senators on Coruscant."

That sent off another round of grumbling. Pellaeon decided he wasn't getting out of this meeting unless he threw the Moff's a bone, so he said, "Expansion into the Mid Rim would tax us too heavily. Our intervention at Adumar was a failure and *Lusankya* is still posted at Qiilura, which means it could counter attacks at Ord Mantell, Bilbringi, or Ithor. However, the Borderlands are less heavily defended."

Angry murmurs turned to hungry ones. Disra said, "The rebels have medium-sized task forces stationed at Quell and Arda. What would it take to dislodge them?"

Disra was better informed than most of the Moff's. He probably had his own spies reporting back to him from Celanon, giving him a blow-by-blow of every skirmish and every decision Pellaeon made.

Still looking at Disra, the admiral said, "A major strike at one planet would bring reinforcements from the other. The upside is that both worlds could be taken at once."

"Excellent," said Flennic. "Admiral Pellaeon, you should begin planning an offensive at once."

Most of the Moff's muttered agreement, but Pellaeon kept watching Disra. The old man said, "The rebel hold on the Meridian Sector is still tenuous. Might you use that to your advantage too, Admiral?"

"I was planning on it."

"Excellent. Then it seems we have some place to start."

“What about Yavin 4?” asked Flennic. “The Jedi base is right on the Borderlands. Taking them out would be a major blow to the rebels.”

“Yes, that worked out so well for Admiral Daala,” Lecersen said sarcastically.

“Daala was a fool. I’m sure Admiral Pellaeon could build a much wiser offensive.”

It was probably meant to be a peace offering or a compliment, but when Flennic turned a wide grin on him, Pellaeon fought hard to hide his revulsion. “There is no offensive planned for Yavin 4 at this time.”

Flennic shrugged as if to say ‘Oh, well.’ Disra said, “Reclaiming our territory in the Borderland Sectors is now our top priority, Admiral, is it not?”

“It is.”

“Then I suggest you head back to Celanon and began planning.” Disra spread out his palms. “I believe that, from here, we can leave things in your most capable hands.”

The lights in the briefing room were turned down low, but through the soft blue glow of the holographic display in the middle of the chamber, Tycho Celchu could make out the faces of the senior New Republic military officials peering at the presentation. Admiral Ackbar was in the center of the table, big bulbous eyes reflecting the holo-image of a TIE/d fighter. To his right were white-bearded Jan Dodonna and craggy-faced Carlist Rieekan. To his left, Garm Bel Iblis gently stroked his white-bearded chin while Firmus Nantz watched with arms crossed and eyes narrowed.

On the other side of the table, Tycho stood with Wedge Antilles and watched, of all people, Wes Janson give the briefing that could make or break the war effort.

“Now, I can’t take credit for this myself,” Janson was saying. “Slicing is not my thing. I’m more into shooting Imps and making bold fashion choices. But for some other members of Wraith Squadron it is, and they’ve been working this over with our best techs on the front lines.”

"Have you had an opportunity to field test it?" asked Nantz. His tone was skeptical, and Tycho had never known the man to be anything but.

"Field testing would give away the element of surprise, sir." Wedge spoke up. "And frankly, that's the pivotal element we're going to need if we really plan on moving forward."

"We've intercepted the transmissions the Imps use to control their droid fighters every time we've encountered them," Janson said. "We've analyzed them and compared them and we've found only one constant element within the shifting algorithm. And, realistically speaking, there *has* to be some constant; the droids need some way to identify whether any given signal bouncing through realspace is meant for them."

"It sounds like all you need is a TIE/d fighter to try it on," Rieekan said.

"We *have* tested it, on TIE/d models captured during the Orinda campaign last year," Janson said, and the old officers relaxed just a little. "Given the nature of the test we could only do it a couple times, but every time we did things went off perfectly. When they received our signal with the key algorithm, they did exactly what we told them to: overload their engine core and self-destruct."

"Simulations are one thing," Nantz said. "Combat situations are very different. You don't know whether the Empire's adjusted its TIE/d manufacturing process since Orinda."

"There's been no indication of that when we've fought them," Tycho said. "The signal the Imps are using hasn't changed the key algorithm either."

"We haven't gotten any indication that they've modified their World Devastators either," Wedge said.

"So how do you gentlemen plan to *use* this new trick?" asked Bel Iblis. "It seems to me you can only use it once."

Dodonna added, "In that case, it had better be for something big."

"We know," Wedge said, "And we have something appropriately big planned."

"Then please explain," Nantz said curtly.

Wedge glanced at Tycho, then Janson, then took a deep breath and said, "Sirs, I want to launch an offensive at Celanon."

They didn't get the reaction they'd expected. The five old warhorses just stared back at them without reply, without change in expression.

Finally, Admiral Ackbar said, "After Orinda, any offensive into Imperial space is considered high-risk."

"We don't know what other tricks Pellaeon has," Rieekan said. "If he had *Dominion* in his pocket he could have other super star destroyers we don't know about."

"And we *do* know that he has *Reaper* at Celanon," said Nantz. "General Antilles, I don't need to remind you how your last encounter with that vessel went."

To his credit, Wedge didn't show the aggravation Tycho knew he felt. The disaster at Orinda had been a lodestone weighing his friend down for the past year, at least until their mission to Adumar.

"I wasn't intending to lead from *Lusankya*'s bridge, or any other one," Wedge said. "In fact, I wanted to request permission to shift my presence back to an X-wing. I think we all know that's where I belong."

Nobody argued, but Ackbar said, "Who do you intend to command the offensive against Celanon, General? Admiral Sovv?"

"To be honest, sirs, I was hoping one of you would volunteer."

That got another stony non-reply from everyone except Bel Iblis. The old Corellian general leaned forward and said, "What do you want to accomplish at Celanon exactly? Take the planet? Break up the World Devastators in the asteroid belt?" He paused intently. "Destroy *Reaper*?"

"None of us would mind seeing *Reaper* destroyed," Wedge said, "And if we can get these droid TIE fighters to

detonate while inside the ship, the damage would give us a huge advantage.”

“You’re asking us to risk the entire defensive position on a trick we don’t even know will work,” Nantz said.

“We *can’t* test it,” Janson insisted. “By its very nature—”

“We understand,” Dodonna interrupted. “And I’m afraid I have to agree with Firmus. I can’t endorse this mission.”

“This could be our only chance to destroy *Reaper*,” Bel Iblis said.

“If the trick with the droid TIEs doesn’t work, what then?” Nantz asked. “And how can we be sure Pellaeon won’t just drop *Dominion* or *another* super star destroyer on us? He has to know Celanon is a primary target. He’ll have layers of defense.”

“Several interdicator cruisers, spread out, could prevent any unwanted surprises,” Ackbar said evenly, though to Tycho’s ears he didn’t seem as enthused about the plan as Bel Iblis.

“If we’re going to pick a fight with *Reaper*,” Wedge said, “I’d prefer to do it away from the planet.”

“The asteroid belt, then,” Rieekan said. “*And* those World Devastators.”

“*Lusankya* is the only ship we can trust to fight those monsters,” Bel Iblis said.

“There *are* enough ships to Qiilura to mount a defense of the Mid Rim if needed,” said Wedge.

Attention seemed to fall on Ackbar. The old Mon Calamari was staring ahead at nothing and everything.

Bel Iblis said, “I believe this is a chance worth taking.”

“I agree,” said Rieekan.

Nantz and Dodonna didn’t need to make their opinions known. Ackbar tilted his head thoughtfully, blinked those big eyes, then said, “General Bel Iblis, please work with General Antilles to put together a tentative attack plan for the Celanon system.”

Tycho heard Janson’s intake of breath, but when he looked sidelong at Wedge, his friend’s face was tight and stony.

“Thank you, sirs,” Wedge said. “This time I won’t let you down. I promise.”

It wouldn’t do for the Supreme Commander of the Imperial Navys to ride between Bastion and Celanon in a shuttlecraft or freighter, so after leaving his conference with the Moffs, Pellaeon took a light shuttle into orbit, where Aren Dorja’s *Relentless* was waiting for him.

Pellaeon made his way straight to the meeting room located behind the destroyer’s command deck. By the time he got there, the ship had already slipped into hyperspace, and flickering blue-white light ran by outside the viewport.

A minute after he sat down, he was met by Dorja and Colonel Reige. As they joined him at the far end of the conference table, Reige asked how the meeting with the Moffs had gone.

“As you’d expect.” Pellaeon drummed his fingers on the tabletop. “They want a new offensive to prove our strength and keep the rebels on their toes.”

“Will we be giving it to them?” Dorja asked. Always hawkish, he had an eager look in his eye.

“We will,” Pellaeon nodded. “Colonel Reige, you should start gathering intel on rebel efforts in the Meridian Sector. See how much they’ve buffed up their presence since they took it from Moff Getelles.”

“If we’re going there, does that mean we’ll be attacking Arda and Quell?” Reige asked.

“That’s right,” Pellaeon nodded. “Though right now I’d prefer just to hit one target. We’ll draw enough ships from the other.”

“Or we’d leave Celanon open for an attack,” Dorja said.

“Celanon’s no good if they lose their stepping-stones into the Borderlands,” Reige shook her head. “Admiral, the 181st has been on a few sorties since we left. They say the rebel flagship *Mon Casima* is at Arda under Admiral Sovv.”

“Then we should plan an attack at Arda. What do we know about Sovv?”

Reige being Reige, she didn't even have to think about it. "Sullustan, as you could tell. First cut his teeth defending his homeworld from Delvardus. Since then he's had sporadic engagements against Harrsk and Teradoc and led an expedition into the Deep Core against Foga Brill's forces. Most recently, he led *Mon Casima* at Adumar."

Pellaeon fought a frown at the reminder of that world and what it had cost. He'd long considered Teren Rogriss to be one of the Empire's best admirals. Instead of the vanity and ambition most officers displayed, he'd been content to serve instead of grabbing power for himself. Apparently, service hadn't been enough. His defection at Adumar had left a hole in Pellaeon's command staff he still couldn't fill.

He'd been considering promoting Aren Dorja, but in all the years they'd known each other he'd never been able to fully trust *Relentless'* captain. Ambition had once nearly prodded him to rebel against Grand Admiral Thrawn, and though Dorja was now older and more worn, Pellaeon knew the pride was still there.

"Who commands at Quell?" Dorja asked.

Reige didn't have to think about that either. "His name is General Etahn A'baht."

Dorja frowned. "I've never heard of him."

"He's Dornean. His people joined the rebels only a few years ago. First saw action with their unified fleet at Orinda, apparently."

"Well, I'm glad we gave a favorable introduction."

"For now, we can count A'baht as an unknown quantity," Pellaeon said, "Which is all the more reason to focus on Sovv."

"Agreed," Reige nodded. "He has a reputation for being little conservative in his strategy, which we can play to our advantage."

"That's good," said Dorja, "Assuming the rebels don't send anything *else* to help their offensive."

"All the more reason to act quickly then." Pellaeon placed a hand on the table. Captain Dorja, go to the bridge and send

messages to Captain Brandei and Captain Ardiffe. Tell them to bring their ships to Celanon."

"Very good, sir." Dorja rose and made for the exit.

After he slipped out, Reige turned to Pellaeon and asked, "What else do you need, Gilad?"

"I'll need the latest intel reports from Arda and Quell. And anything you can get me from your agents on Coruscant."

"That may be a little trickier," Reige admitted. "We know the rebel high command has been huddled in some conference, but I haven't been able to get anything beyond that."

"I know. We'll just have to monitor their actions closely and guess their intentions."

Reige didn't like that word, *guess*. It was all over her face. She'd made a career by knowing things for sure. Nonetheless, she got to her feet and said, "I'll get everything I have. Do you want me to bring them here?"

"Please." Pellaeon didn't have the energy to rise from his chair right then. He was getting too damned old.

Some of the weariness must have shown on his face. Reige tilted her head and asked, "Are you all right, Gilad?"

"Just thoughts." He offered a smile.

Reige's hard expression softened a little. He was reminded of the woman she'd been ten years back, of the brief time when their relationship had passed beyond personal friendship and mutual respect. It was a time neither of them tried to dwell on, but had never quite been able to pull away from, just like he'd never wholly been able to put aside his memory of Hallena, even after all that had gone between them.

Because of that long-off time, because of that look, something inside him gave in. He said, "Molgarin, I have a son."

Her eyes went wide with surprise. Before she could ask anything, before Vitor could drop into the conversation, Pellaeon said, "He's a pilot. He flies for the One-Eighty-First."

Reige's jaw worked silently for a moment before she managed to say, "I had no idea."

"I didn't either. Not until Orinda."

Reige thought a second, asked, "His mother?"

"Long dead."

"Does he know? Your son?"

"No. What could I tell him? I didn't even know he existed. His mother and I... didn't part on good terms. It was why I tried to hard to forget her. It was why I never... never mentioned her to you."

"If you feel you have to explain something to me-"

"That's not it," he cut her off, but wondered why he was saying this to her now. The looming threat of another operation had rattled him. He'd never told anyone about Mynar before, but if there anyone he could have told, anyone at all, it was Reige.

Despite all that had passed between them, or because of it, she was the closest thing he had left to a friend.

"I just needed to tell *someone*," he offered weakly.

"Oh," Reige said softly. "I thought you were looking for advice."

That might well have been it too. Pellaeon hardly knew himself, not since that talk with Mynar after Orinda. "Do you have any to give?"

"Gilad... *Admiral*, you can't afford to be thinking about family now. We're about to go into battle against the rebels again and the stakes are higher than ever. The entire survival of our government, our people, is at stake."

"This distraction is dangerous. I know."

"What I want to say is that you should put it all aside. Forget about your son, about everything, and focus on the battle."

It was what he'd expected from her. "When Vitor gets old enough, would you send him into battle, then just not think about him?"

"No," she admitted.

"Then you see my dilemma."

“Too well.” She looked down at the table. “Gil, I can’t tell you what to do. It’s your life, your family.”

Reige had almost been family. Possibly she still was; it was one of those thoughts he’d had to push aside, a hope he’d had to surrender for the sake of survival: the Empire’s and his own. More than ever, he felt weighted down by this war’s awful attrition.

“If you tell him you’re his father, what then?”

“I have no idea,” Pellaeon admitted. “But at least it would mean something new. At the moment... I’m stuck.”

“It might be hard for him. Getting that kind of revelation right before a battle.”

“I know. I can’t drop it on him now. I won’t.”

“Then whatever you do after the battle, think about it then. We need all of your wits here, Gilad.”

“I knew, Molgarin,” he forced a smile. “I know. Thank you.”

She nodded hesitantly, then turned. She knew when the conversation was done.

Once she was gone, Pellaeon kicked his swiveling chair around to face the blur of hyperspace. It wasn’t often that he simply stared at it anymore. When he was a cadet training in the Judicial Forces, one empire and two republics ago, he’d loved to spend hours in transit just staring at hyperspace. A lot of cadets did. And then, gradually, it had become so commonplace that they’d lost interest.

It was sad, getting numb to wondrous things. He’d realized that recently, and had been making a more conscious effort to appreciate them since Orinda.

It hadn’t been the battle itself that had moved him, but the discovery he’d made there.

One day, he’d reveal it all to Devis. He told himself that now, made himself swear that vow. One day, when the campaign was over, when the rebels and the Empire weren’t constantly at each other’s throats, when a lifetime of war had run dry and they finally had the space and time to live like a normal father and son should.

He told himself that and he believed it. He only doubted whether that day would ever come.

When they got back to Qiilura, things happened fast.

General Bel Iblis came with them, and the moment he stepped onto *Lusankya* it was clear the old warhorse had the respect and obedience of everyone on board.

Tycho could see the relief on Wedge's face as the destroyer's command staff escorted Bel Iblis from the landing bay to the bridge.

"Ready to get back to flying?" Janson asked.

"You have no idea," Wedge said, and he even allowed a smile.

By the time Tycho, Wedge, and Janson had deposited their belongings in their quarters, *Lusankya* was already in hyperspace, en route for the staging points on the edge of Imperial space from which she would launch one of the three prongs of the assault on Celanon.

Wedge quickly called a meeting of the pilots for Rogue and Wraith Squadrons. They assembled in *Lusankya*'s secondary launch bay and clustered between rows of docked X-wings. Both squadrons were at full strength again, and it was the first time they were meeting as a team since before Wedge, Tycho, Janson, and Hobbie had been whisked away for their mission at Adumar.

It felt like a whole new mood had swept through the crew. They were about to plunge into their biggest battle since Orinda, but just seeing Wedge back in a flight suit was enough to rekindle everyone's optimism. The young ones, like Nevil, Varth, and Pagat, seemed a little awed by the sight. Veterans like Inyri, Gavin, Face Loran, and Kell Tainer were grinning, like they were back in some good old days.

Tycho spotted one pilot who still looked reticent and slipped beside her. Cheriss ke Hanadi had joined up with the New Republic following the civil war on her native Adumar. The small, black-haired young woman had been brought up

in a culture that idolized dueling, be it hand-to-hand or in starfighters, and she'd been one of the best back home. Now, though, on the deck of a super star destroyer and surrounded by luminaries, she looked uncharacteristically unsure of herself.

"You'll do fine, Cheriss," Tycho told her.

"I'm not used to flying in combat missions like this." She tugged awkwardly at the neck of her baggy black flightsuit.

"Just think of it as a whole bunch of one-on-one duels thrown together."

"Including *Lusankya* versus *Reaper*?"

"Yes, and you should stay well away from that duel. What's your designation, Cheriss?"

"I'm flying as Wraith Two."

"Then you're flying Janson's wing. That's good. Follow him. Do what he does."

She raised a black eyebrow. "How far do you want me to take that advice?"

Tycho glanced across the crowd, to where Wraith Leader was currently making conversation with an incredulous-looking Shalla Nelprin. His garish yellow-and-black checkerboard flight suit and helmet could be spotted from anywhere in the hangar.

"Keep it in the cockpit," he told her.

"I thought as much."

"Definitely not the fashion sense."

"The thought never occurred to me."

Tycho grinned. Before he could add anything more, Wedge clambered up onto the nose of his X-wing and held out his hands, calling for a stop to the chatter.

When everyone quieted down, Wedge said, "All right, thank you all for being here. And getting quiet when I told you to."

"You're welcome!" Janson shouted, far too loud.

Wedge rolled his eyes but couldn't stop his grin. "All right, as you probably know by now, we're going to be running a mission to Celanon very soon. This is going to be a critical

battle. We'll be going up against Admiral Pellaeon, *Reaper*, three World Devastators, and whatever else the Imps can throw at us."

The jovial faces in the crowd got quickly sober. Wedge continued, "Our squadrons are going to play a critical role in this fight and you all need to be aware of that. Now, some of you have worked with *Lusankya*'s techs to crack the algorithm used to insert commands into the Empire's TIE/d fighters. As you all know, we've found a way to hack into their little droid brains and insert commands. Since the frequency the Imps use keeps shifting, we won't be able to input a given command for more than one-third of a standard second, which means it's got to be simple, short, and, sweet."

He paused, took a breath, and said, "We're going to blow them up, in other words. Now, we're going to be projecting this signal through a bunch of modified skiprays, the ones Spotter Squad usually uses for recon and sensor probes. Our job is to safeguard those blastboats."

A hand shot up. Wedge nodded, and Gavin asked, "Why can't we just pump out the signal from *Lusankya*?"

"Very good question. Wes, do you think you could field it?"

"Uh, I'll try my best," Janson said. Raising his voice, he went on, "Basically, if the signal came from one big source, it would be more vulnerable to Imp jamming fields, and you know they'll have those up. If we keep it short-range, we can make every turned-on droid within a specific radius self-detonate no matter how they try to scramble us."

"In other words," Wedge said, "We'll zip past a Devastator, and all we need to do is broadcast our signal to burst it open from the inside." A few people clapped. Wedge said, "The important thing, the *critical* thing, is to protect those skiprays. That is every pilot's top priority."

Another hand went up. When she got the go-ahead, Inyri asked, "Sir, do you know if the One-Eighty-First is going to be at Celanon?"

"They're been reported there, yes." Wedge nodded grimly. "But engagement with them is *not* our priority. We're to avoid them if at all possible."

It was easier said than done, and they all knew it. Phennir would seek them out, especially once he realized what they were doing to the droid TIEs.

"All right, people," Wedge clapped his hands. "We've still got a few hours. Hit the fresher, get a little food, but get ready and stay alert. I want everyone reassembled here and ready to fly at exactly 0800 hours."

A few pilots clapped or shouted affirmation. Most slipped away, eager to get the last necessary business while they still could.

Tycho slipped away from Cheriss and met Wedge as he climbed down the X-wings's ladder and back onto the deck.

"Well," he asked, "Did that feel good?"

"A little," Wedge ran a hand through his dark hair.

"It *looked* like it felt good," Hobbie said as he sidled next to Tycho. Janson was right behind him.

"I can't tell you how much of a relief it is to have Bel Iblis commanding this fight," Wedge admitted.

"Don't worry, we already know," said Hobbie.

Wedge feigned offense, but Tycho said, "We'll watch your back, Wedge. Iella made us promise we'd bring you home."

Wedge looked embarrassed. "Did she really?"

Janson nodded eagerly. "Oh, yes. She said, 'If my fiancée doesn't come home from this rodding mission I'll personally tear off your-'"

"She didn't say it *quite* like that," Tycho said, "But she *was* pretty forceful."

"Well..." Wedge thought for a moment. "It's better than asking you to vape me when I don't expect it."

"Don't worry," said Hobbie, "I'm sure she'll get around to that after you've been married for a few months."

Janson gave an over-dramatic sigh and clapped Wedge on the shoulder. "To think, my baby's finally leaving the nest."

He's all grown up, he's found himself a nice girl to settle down with... Oh, it's so *bittersweet*."

"I always knew you'd be the first one to get paired off, Wedge," said Hobbie.

"Really?" Wedge frowned, like he'd always thought the opposite.

"Well, it wasn't going to be Wes."

"Hey!" Janson pouted, but shifted his attention to Tycho. "Any chance for marriage number two?"

Now Tycho found himself embarrassed. "Ah, I don't know. I've never really talked to Winter about it..."

"Why not?" Wedge asked seriously.

"Oh, you all know how it is," Tycho tried to wave them off. "The lives we lead, it's not like we get time together."

"You just saw her on Coruscant," Janson said.

He was trying not to think of Winter. He always tried not to think of her before going into a combat situation, to keep his mind clear. "Yes, because the Solo kids were visiting their parents and I was in town for a couple days. That was luck."

"Luck's what you make of it," said Hobbie.

Tycho twisted his face. "That almost sounded like optimism, Hobbie."

"Oh, sorry, my mistake." Hobbie coughed, put on a deep frown, and said, "We're all going to die miserable old bachelors, even Wedge."

The other three regarded him for a moment before Janson shrugged and said, "Better than dying today."

"That's how I'm taking it," Tycho said, "Just one day at a time."

"Good enough for wartime," Wedge said, "But I'm hoping we can start wrapping up this war at Celanon."

"Me too," Tycho admitted. "But for now, we do it like I said. One day at a time."

Gilad Pellaeon was halfway through his sleep cycle when *Lusankya* decanted from hyperspace near the Celanon

System's asteroid belt. If he'd been younger, he would have thrown on his uniform and scrambled to the bridge within five minutes. As it was, it took him seven.

The moment he stepped on the command deck, Reige was on him, simultaneously apologetic and seething. "They got the drop on us sir, I don't know how. They must have anticipated our next strike and moved to block it."

"Did we know *Lusankya* had left Qiilura?"

"No, only that the conference on Coruscant had ended. I'm sorry, Admiral. I should have seen this. I should have."

"It's all right, Molgarin," he said, though they both knew it wasn't.

Reaper was currently positioned midway between Celanon and the asteroid belt, and Captain Arnef had already started moving the super star destroyer out to engage *Lusankya*. The rebel super star destroyer was already moving in on one of the World Devastators, while the other two were slipping awkwardly through the asteroid belt as quickly as their massive sluggish bodies could, desperate to put distance between themselves and *Lusankya*.

Captain Dorja's *Relentless*, as well as *Nemesis*, were also out by the asteroid belt, awkwardly keeping their distance from *Lusankya* while still launching fighter screens to match the rebel ones. Pellaeon made for the comm station, walking quickly but without visible panic, and called up *Relentless*.

"We're on our way to your position," he said as soon as Dorja holo-image came up. "Hold where you are now and do not engage *Lusankya* directly."

"The thought never crossed my mind," Dorja gritted his teeth.

"We'll bring *Judicator* and *Tyrant* as well."

"What if this is just a feint to lure you away from the planet?"

"I'll leave *Rampart* behind, along with *Chimaera*, *Death's Head*, and the interdictors."

Dorja gave a curt nod. "We'll hold out as long as we can, Admiral."

Pellaeon killed the connection. Reige hovered anxiously over his shoulder.

“Call Phennir if you haven’t already, Colonel. Tell the One-Eighty-First to take vanguard position.”

“Gladly. And, sir, should we send out a call for more ships?”

They’d already amassed a sizable fleet at Celanon with the intent of using it for a renewed offensive. That included every star destroyer Grand Admiral Thrawn had mustered for his main fleet (save *Inexorable*, which had been lost with Byss, and *Stormhawk*, lost at Orinda) as well as the massive *Rampart* and, of course, *Reaper* herself.

Despite it all, he didn’t feel confident. The Rebels probably had the task forces from Quell and Arda sitting in the wings.

“Tell *Dominion* to come as fast as she can,” he said finally.

“Gladly, sir,” Reige nodded, and went off to relay orders.

Dominion was at Tangrene, many hours away, but she still might be useful, even without an admiral as experienced as Rogriss at her helm. Every minute might end up counting in an engagement like this; alternatively, the fight might be well over by the time *Dominion* arrived.

This entire battle was full of unknowns. That made it the worst kind.

Tycho Celchu’s X-wing shuddered slightly as it slipped out from beneath *Lusankya*’s bow and shot toward the asteroid belt.

The super star destroyer had begun pumping out her fighter wing the minute after leaving hyperspace. B-wing attack craft and K-wing heavy bombers soared up to engage the two Impstars while squadrons of fast interceptors raced toward the belt, where the World Devastators were already starting to pump out their robotic TIE fighters.

The Rogues and Wraiths fell in behind the interceptor squads and kept close formation around the modified skipray blastboats. The skiprays were more nimble than a

shuttle but sluggish compared to an X-wing, and once the Imps figured out what they were doing, they'd throw every manned fighter they had at them.

"Stay in formation," Wedge warned them. He flew at the head of the broad span of spacecraft, both as Rogue Leader and Wraith Leader. "Bel Iblis wants to try and pound the first Devastators from a distance. Stand by."

Wedge dropped his X-wing's speed and the rest of them followed. Tycho shifted in his cockpit, uncomfortable not to be fighting as the space ahead of them lit up with explosions.

Lusankya was pouring turbolaser fire into the World Devastator's forward shields, and so far the great machine was absorbing those attacks while its massive tractor beams continued to automatically pull mineral-rich space rock into the mouth of its fiery interior furnace.

It was easy to tell what Bel Iblis' game plan was. He wanted to wait until *Reaper* was close enough to engage before playing their trick and detonating the TIE/d fighters.

Assuming their trick worked, it would have a spectacular effect. If it failed, well, they were in for a long slog.

Thankfully, Bel Iblis wasn't relying on one trick alone. As the Rogues and Wraiths sat waiting over the asteroid belt, watching as *Reaper*'s dark dagger grew closer and closer, Tycho's sensors reported that the second task force had arrived from Arda.

Led by Admiral Sovv's powerful new MC90 cruiser *Mon Casima*, they dropped out of hyperspace at the exact location Bel Iblis must have given them: behind the two Impstars.

The two star destroyers found themselves squeezed between powerful enemies. They immediately began moving closer together to cover each other's exposed flanks, while also drawing their fighter screens close to defend against bomber attacks that now came from two directions.

"Those Impstars aren't going to last long," Face Loran muttered from his X-wing.

"*Reaper*'s almost in range," Wedge reminded them. "Her fighters are already breaking over the asteroid belt. Looks like they're going to help the Impstars."

"Our sensors are showing those are TIE Defenders," said a voice from Spotter One, the lead skipray.

"Phennir," Hobbie breathed. The man must have been eager for payback after Adumar. Tycho was relieved he was being sent after someone else.

Ahead of them, *Lusankya*'s torrent of fire finally cracked through the Devastator's shields and began tearing up its infrastructure. Its target now vulnerable, *Lusankya* slipped forward and began firing repeated concussion missile barrages. The forward section of the Devastator was ripped apart by a series of spectacular explosions.

By moving ahead, though, *Lusankya* brought herself closer to *Reaper*. Pellaeon star destroyer unleashed its first barrage, which *Lusankya* caught with her bow shields.

"More fighters coming out of *Reaper*," Spotter One reported. "Looks like... droid TIEs."

A second later, Wedge said, "We've just got the go from *Lusankya*. All ships, on me."

His X-wing raced forward. Tycho followed, keeping on Spotter One's port flank. Kral Nevil and Inyri Forge were right behind him, while the lead Wraith Squadron flight, made up of Janson, Cheriss, and Voort "Piggy" SaBinring, guarded Spotter Two. All told, they had twenty-three X-wings guarding six modified skiprays. As *Reaper* loomed ahead of them, Tycho prayed it would be enough.

"Tell us when to fire up the signal," Spotter One called.

"Wait until we get closer," Wedge said.

"Any closer and we'll get a face full of TIEs," Hobbie warned.

"That's the idea."

"Oh, lovely."

"Cut the chatter," Tycho warned.

There wasn't time for banter, not when the first swarm of droid TIEs was almost on them. They were coming on a

wave; once they washed past, there would be a clear shot at *Reaper*. Wedge clearly hoped to destroy as many droid TIEs as possible when they were inside their berths, thus doing maximum damage to the super star destroyer.

The trick of it was that they had no idea how many squadrons of droid fighters *Reaper* actually had. She was already starting to pump out some I-7 Howlrunners as well, so Wedge was gambling that they were keeping some in reserve.

Well, it wasn't like the whole battle wasn't a gamble anyway.

"All power to forward shields!" Wedge commanded as the TIE/d wave washed over them.

Green laser-blasts scattered around Tycho's X-wing, blinding him. The TIE/d fighters kept coming, and for a moment he wondered whether the things hadn't been programmed to execute suicide collisions that would wipe them all out before they even got close to *Reaper*.

To his relief, their droid brains and nimble engines were working as expected. The little fighters swept past the X-wings and skiprays without a collision.

"Report!" Wedge ordered. "Anyone down?"

"This is Spotter Four," one said, "We've taken heavy damage on our dorsal S-foil."

"They're coming back around fast, Lead," Face warned.

Reaper was getting damned close too; she was already sending out turbolaser blasts in their direction.

"Okay," Wedge called, "All Spotters, get ready to broadcast on my mark."

"Wait a second," said Spotter Four, "We've got a—"

Suddenly there was a burst of static. Tycho saw one skipray marker wink out on his sensors.

"They're coming behind us fast, Wedge!" Face called. "It's now or never!"

"All right. All Spotters, fire it up!"

The remaining five skiprays began broadcasting the signal. For a moment that seemed to last forever, nothing happened.

Then the wave of TIE/d fighters on Tycho's rear sensors simply winked out.

"What happened?" Cheriss asked excitedly. "Did we get them?"

"They're down!" Face cheered. "Went up like a kriffing ribbon of fire!"

Tycho wished he could have seen it, but it was far behind him and *Reaper* was ominously filling his view. That got some cheers nonetheless, which Wedge quickly quieted down. "All ships, head for *Reaper*. We're going to buzz her hangar before they figure out what we're up to."

"Lotta hot light coming out of that ship, Lead," Hobbie warned.

"Then keep dancing. You too, Spotters."

"Affirmative," said Spotter One. "Ready when you are."

"Let's kick it in," Wedge called, and his fighter burst forward.

They stabbed upward toward *Reaper*'s massive underside. Wedge had them pull up right close to the ship's ventral shields before leveling out to fly in parallel to the flat hull. It was a maneuver they'd done dozens of times beneath *Lusankya*, but this ship was trying to kill them.

They hugged close enough to the shields to avoid most of *Reaper*'s turret guns, but one turbolaser blast clipped Spotter Three and sent it tumbling; another blast vaped it in an instant. In minutes, they'd lost a third of their skips, but at least they hadn't lost any X-wings yet.

"Hangar's coming up," Wedge called. "Get ready!"

The cavernous mouth to *Reaper*'s flight deck suddenly opened up above them. Tycho craned his head back, saw the white shining guts of the ship: the crew in orange jumpsuits, the pilots in black crawling into their Howlrunners, the racks of TIE/d fighters clinging to one wall.

Suddenly the whole hangar burst bright. Tycho winced, squeezed his eyes shut, and when he opened them again they were racing along *Reaper*'s underside once more.

"That got it!" Wedge called.

"I *told* them it would work," Janson said. "Didn't I tell them?"

"All ships, peel away," Wedge said. "Let's hit up the nearest Devastator."

"Yes, *sir!*" effused Cheriss.

As they dove down, away from the super star destroyer, Tycho craned his neck and got a better look. Debris was pouring out of *Reaper's* main hangar and spreading into the vacuum. Its turbolasers kept firing but the shots went erratically wide as explosions continued to rock the warship.

He had no idea how much damage they'd really done to *Reaper*, but from here it looked pretty damned good.

It was a satisfying thought, but Tycho had to push it away. Wedge led them into a downward dive, into the asteroid belt, toward the second Devastator.

The fight was off to a good start, but it was far from over.

"Damage report!" Captain Arnef snapped. "*Now!*"

A hapless lieutenant in the crew pit shook her head in confusion. "I'm sorry, sir, but communications with the hangar are down."

"Then comma nearby section, tell them to send a runner," Pellaeon ordered her in as calm a tone as he could muster.

"Yes, Admiral. Right away, sir."

Another voice behind him said, "Admiral, those X-wings and skiprays are pulling away."

"I'm glad to hear it," Reige said from Pellaeon's side. "Lieutenant, was there any sign they fired a warhead into the hangar?"

"Nothing." The tactical lieutenant shook his head. "But, sirs, we're getting strange readings. We're losing signals from droid TIEs, *lots* of them. Howlrunner pilots are reporting them detonating, sirs, all at the same time."

The answer was instantly obvious to Reige. "They've found a way to make the droid TIEs self-destruct."

Pellaeon cursed. It was an obvious flaw in the automated fighters' design; the rebels had used a similar trick to

destroy the World Devastators at Mon Calamari. Pellaeon had removed the slave circuitry from his remaining Devastators and had his best techs create new encrypted signals to coordinate the droid fighters, but in the end the rebels had outwitted them again.

Now, at least, he knew the great surprise they'd come to Celanon to spring on him.

"Admiral, I am *so* sorry." Reige's face had gone pale. "I should have anticipated this, sir. And I should have known *Lusankya* was coming. I missed it, sir, I completely."

Pellaeon too her firmly by the shoulders. "Recriminations come latter. We have to fight now, Molgarin, understood?"

She shivered and gave her firmest nod.

Pellaeon turned away. "Comm, get online with the Devastator commanders. Tell them to shut down all droid TIE fighters *immediately*. And call *Chimaera* and *Death's Head*. Tell them we need their assistance. And... call Colonel Phennir. Tell him to chase down those X-wings and skiprays before they do any more damage."

Pellaeon had been loathe to bring *Chimaera* into a combat situation, just as he'd been reluctant to send the 181st chasing Rogues Squadron, but the fight had turned desperate.

"Admiral," the tactical lieutenant said, "Six more rebel ships have just dropped out of hypersapce, midway between us and the planet. Looks like... two gunships, a light cruiser, three heavies. Matches profile of the Quell task force."

"Tell Ardiff and Harbid to fight their way through."

Reaper's deck shook beneath them as the rebels raised an interdiction field from the drag ships they'd brought with them from Arda.

Even if *Dominion* got here, it would be pulled out of hyperspace too far away to take immediate action.

Strange enough, Pellaeon felt a little relief. To himself he muttered, "Well, at least they've played their full hand."

When the task force from Quell dropped out of hyper-space at the exact mid-system coordinates that Bel Iblis had

given them, they found themselves staring down an unpleasant surprise: two *Imperial*-class destroyers and one two-kilometer-long, diamond-shaped *Secutor*-class. All of them were spilling out fighters: TIE Interceptors, Howl-runners, droid fighters.

It was not the greeting Etahn A'baht had wanted.

Charnak, *Yakez*, and *Kenobi* immediately began launching fighters and opened up with their forward batteries. The Imperial ships gave as good as they got: the two destroyers were clearly trying to push ahead to help *Reaper* battle *Lusankya*, and as *Charnak*'s bridge shuddered under repeated turbolaser volleys, A'baht staggered over to the tactical station to get a better read on the fight in the asteroid belt.

The battle seemed to be going better there. *Reaper* had one flank pressed against the edge of the belt while her other exchanged broadsides with *Lusankya*. Admiral Sovv's task force was brawling hard with four Impstars. The two remaining World Devastators were moving out of the asteroid belt to help them.

"General, they're chewing up our fighter screen," Been L'toth reported.

"I can see that," A'baht growled as *Charnak* shook again. "Captain, get me *Lusankya*."

"Gladly, sir."

L'toth walked across the shaking bridge more quickly than A'baht, and by the time the general got to the comm station he was looking down at the holo-image of Garm Bel Iblis.

"How are you holding up, *Charnak*?" the old Corellian asked.

"Just barely. That carrier is full of droid TIE fighters. Can we get help with that?"

After a tiny pause, Bel Iblis nodded. "I'll send a few fighters to help you."

"Good. General, they're trying to push over the asteroid belt to help *Reaper*. I'm not sure we can hold them off."

"You can start start falling back to the belt, General."

A'baht was a little surprised by that. Those three big destroyers the Imperials would surely follow, and once they reached the belt they'd come close to tipping the balance of the fight in Imperial favor.

Bel Iblis apparently didn't notice the Dornean's hesitation. "The skiprays will meet you soon. Will you need any other assistance?"

"I'll let you know, General."

"Good. *Lusankya* out."

The holo winked off. A'baht glanced at young L'toth, clinging to his side.

He said, "Follow your orders, Captain."

L'toth did. *Yakez* and *Kenobi* turned around first and began their fighting retreat toward the belt, while *Charnak* lingered a little longer, slowing down the three destroyers that kept pressing forward.

By now the fighters were on them; droid TIEs tangled with *Charnak*'s E-wings while Schimitar bombers made attack runs on the cruiser's hull. Their payloads thundered against *Charnak*'s shields, and A'baht knew that if help didn't get help soon, they wouldn't make it to the belt.

When Tycho had first laid eyes on a World Devastator, it had been hovering close to the surface on Mon Calamari, like a sinister floating mountain of durasteel, sucking up everything that got too close to its ravenous furnace-mouth.

They didn't look quite as bad as they floated in space, but they were intimidating enough.

Tycho hung close behind Spotter One's skipray as it dove close to the Devastator. The monstrosity had pulled halfway out of the belt by now; its partner had escaped the drifting chain of rocks and was heading toward Sovv's fleet as fast as its repulsors could push it. A chunk of Wraith Squadron had just been pulled away to help A'baht's task force on the inner side of the belt, which meant they were down to just a pair of modified skiprays and the hope that the Devastator hadn't shut down power on all of its droid TIEs just yet.

"Okay," Wedge called, "Just like before. Make a pass on the underside."

"Copy, Rogue Leader," Spotter One said. "Shields at maximum."

They slipped between the World Devastator's two foot-like aft repulsors and beneath its flat, broad belly. The Devastator, designed for ground assault, had more accurate weapons on its underside than *Lusankya*. Laser-blasts splashed against Tycho's shields and rattled his cockpit.

"Little hairy, Lead," Hobbie warned.

"Hold tight, everyone," Wedge said.

Tycho heard a shout, and a burst of static, and saw that one of Gavin's pilots was gone. A second later, a series of explosions began to burst through the World Devastator's hull.

Elation replaced grief. Wedge called, "All ships, pull back! Pull back!"

Tycho was happy to comply. As they pulled away from the Devastator and out into the space beyond the asteroid belt, he angled his fighter to get a better look.

The explosion wasn't as satisfying to see as the one from *Reaper*, but it was still pretty good. The World Devastator vented debris from the hole in its underside. Its two rear repulsor-engines went dark, though the forward ones kept straining to drag the rest of the massive craft clear of the asteroid belt. Its furnace-mouth still flared as well. Tycho was vaguely reminded of a man trying to pull himself head-first over the mouth of a cliff while his legs dangled off the edge and his jaw hung open, lungs straining for breath.

Just when he was starting to feel confident, Spotter One called, "Incoming TIE Defenders, ten o'clock!"

All four squadrons of the 181st Imperial Fighter Wing dropped into a steep dive, spraying laser-blasts ahead of them. The X-wings and skiprays that had just crippled the second World Devastator broke formation and tried to flee.

Phennir overcame the momentary temptation to locate Rogue Squadron's leader and chase him. Wedge Antilles

was a secondary priority. He vectored toward the closest blastboat and locked torpedoes on the target. The skipray's defensive laser-turret tracked him, spraying red blasts against his shields; he jerked clear, then let his torps fly. The skipray tried to knock the torps out with its cannon and picked off the first warhead. The second curved around and slammed hard into the skipray's starboard shields.

A wash of flame overcame the craft, and for a second Phennir felt sublime satisfaction. Then the flame fell back like a red cape being cast away, and the skipray charged at him, guns blazing.

A second later, two torps slammed into its port side. The first hit the shields but the second tore through them and then the hull. The skipray exploded brilliantly and was gone.

"Thanks for the help, Lead," Mynar Devis whooped as his red-striped TIE Defender circled around to settle behind Phennir's ship.

"Quite," Phennir grunted.

He checked his scanners and saw that the other skipray had also been knocked out of the fight. It was just them and the Rouges now, and the X-wings were already starting to fall back into the asteroid field in a desperate attempt at evasion.

"All ships," Phennir called, "Break formation and go after the Rogues. Weapons free."

His squad leaders clicked affirmative, and the 181st fell into the asteroid belt.

The tumbling space-rocks, ranging in size from a small city to a human fist, only added to the chaos of the chase. X-wings and TIE Defenders, the latter far outnumbering the former, weaved around the asteroids, spraying laser-blasts or popping off torps, breaking, dodging, running, dancing.

It was impossible to pick out one X-wing from another, no matter how much Phennir wanted to find Antilles, Celchu, Janson, or Klivian. Those four pilots had cost him three of his best at Adumar, ones he'd picked specifically for their raw dogfighting skills. He'd already had to replace Seth

Avrian as squad leader and would have lost Mynar Devis too, if he hadn't gotten a last-minute request from Admiral Pellaeon, of all people, to keep Devis on *Reaper* as temporary wing commander.

Phennir got behind one X-wing long enough to light up its aft shields with laser blasts, then pop off a torp. The pointer broke into evasive maneuvers and wound a tight corkscrew around a long spinning spindle of space rock. The torp impacted on the asteroid but Phennir cut over the top of the rock and intercepted the X-wing right when it pulled away. His lasers tore through its forward shields and shredded its nose, detonating the forward magazines. Phennir was barely able to pull up and avoid the resulting fireball.

That pilot had been good, but not as good as the ones on Adumar. Phennir spun around and scanned the asteroid field for more X-wings. All his eyesight could pick up were intermittent flashes of lasers and brief explosions, scattered and random throughout so many drifting rocks.

Then he glanced at his scanners and his gut fell. A big wave of rebel fighters was sweeping into the asteroid field from the other side. He switched to long-range sensors and got the bigger picture: the third rebel task force was crossing over the asteroid field with *Chimaera* and *Death's Head* on its tail while *Rampart* lingered behind, reluctant to engage for some reason. The rebels were pumping starfighters into the belt to help the Rogues; suddenly the 181st was drastically outnumbered.

"Lead, we have incoming!" Damkin called. "I'm getting X-wings, E-wings, A-wings—"

A new transmission cut him off. Suddenly Admiral Pellaeon himself was speaking in Phennir's ear, saying "Colonel, you must fall back at once."

"Not yet," Phennir snapped instinctively. He didn't want to run from this fight, not until he absolutely had to. "*Chimaera* and *Death's Head* still need fighter support."

"They have their own screens but they won't help yours in time. Pull out, Colonel."

“Admiral, the Rogues are-

“Pull out!” Pellaeon almost shouted. He sounded more frantic than authoritative but it was enough to stop Phennir from arguing.

“Understood,” he growled. “Pulling out now.”

He switched his comlink to the 181st’s channel and said, “All ships, fall back to *Reaper*. Do not, repeat, do *not* engage.”

“Yes, *sir*.” Damkin said, voice quavering with relief.

Phennir spun his TIE Defender to face *Reaper*, still slugging it out with *Lusankya* on the edge of the asteroid field. Beyond them, the four smaller star destroyers were holding their own against the second rebel task force. The last World Devastator was, even now, dropping down in front of a rebel star destroyer with its furnace glowing hot and hungry. The arrival of the third rebel task force would threaten *Reaper*’s other flank, but thankfully *Chimaera*, *Death’s Head*, and *Rampart* could handle them.

The fight was far from over. Phennir was glad for that; it meant he still had the opportunity for revenge.

Gilad Pellaeon watched from *Reaper*’s forward viewport as the pointed prow of the rebel destroyer was pulled into the last Devastator’s mouth. Escape pods were already shooting out of its hull and the other rebel ships were frantically trying to catch them all, even as the Devastator kept on chewing up its victim.

With the second rebel task force in disarray, Pellaeon had an opening. He ordered communications to call *Nemesis* over to help *Reaper* defend against the last rebel task force now trying to cross above the asteroid belt. If he could press this force on both ends they might actually have a chance of turning the tide of battle.

“Admiral,” Reige told him, “The 181st has fallen back to our position. What should I tell them?”

Pellaeon thought a moment. He’d called Phennir’s people back in a fit of panic, knowing that the new wave of rebel

starfighters would tear up the 181st in the asteroid belt and maybe even kill his son. He could accept throwing Mynar into a battle but only if the odds were in his side's favor. If he could have ordered the entire wing back into *Reaper's* hangar he would have, but the main flight deck was out of commission and Phennir was clearly still in a fighting mood.

Pellaeon considered for a moment, then said, "Tell Red Squadron to form up on *Nemesis* and protect our starboard flank. The other three squads can begin an attack on *Lusankya*."

Reige blinked. Pellaeon usually didn't micromanage the fighter wings in such detail. Giving Phennir the order to charge a super star destroyer was also a little bold, though he didn't doubt the colonel was eager for a bloody challenge, especially after he'd been denied revenge against Rogue Squadron.

"Keep Bel Iblis distracted," Pellaeon explained. "The rebels got the drop on us but if we can confuse them, we stand a chance of keeping the battle going until *Dominion* arrives."

"I understand. She should drop into the interdiction field very soon, but once she does..."

"It will be a crawl, I know. We have to be ready anyway, Colonel."

"Of course," Reige nodded. "I'll send the order now."

"General," L'toth reported, "Our fighters are pulling out of the asteroid field. They'll form around us shortly."

"And not a moment too soon," A'baht said.

His task force had now risen over the asteroid field and sat poised to attack *Reaper's* starboard flank while *Lusankya* kept pounding her port. In theory it was the perfect attack position, the one General Bel Iblis had been hoping for when he planned this attack.

Unfortunately, things had gone awry. There were more star destroyers at Celanon than the most recent intelligence reports had indicated, and now that the surprise of the attack

had worn off, they'd repositioned themselves to fight effectively. Even now, an Imperial destroyer crossed over *Reaper's* bow to attack *Kenobi* and the gunships head-on, while two more destroyers were biting at *Charnak* and *Yakez* from the rear.

Wraith Squadron had effectively destroyed the *Secutor*-class destroyer's TIE/d squadrons, and with its supply depleted the ship hung back, but A'baht knew it, too, could join the fray at any moment, and when it did attack it would be a formidable opponent.

What he needed more than anything, certainly more than a regrouped fighter screen, was help from Sovv's fleet, but right now *Poesy* was tackling one star destroyer, *Mon Casima* barely handling two more, and the star destroyer *Freedom* was being swallowed up piece-by-piece by the final active World Devastator. A'baht had seen holos of what they'd done at Mon Calamari, including eating the destroyer *Emancipator*, but he'd never expected to see one of the monsters in action with his own eyes.

The one good thing about their position was that *Lusankya* had already destroyed one Devastator, while the second had been crippled when its TIE/d complement exploded inside the hull. Even now, though, the Devastator sat on the edge of the asteroid field just beyond *Reaper's* bow, furnace blazing and repulsors just barely keeping it from being chewed up by all that space rock.

As A'baht watched that struggling Devastator from *Charnak's* bridge, an idea came to him. A mad, stupid idea that was so ridiculous it could never possible work. He shifted his attention away from it, to the blaze of *Kenobi's* thrust engines as she began to exchange fire with the Impstar ahead. Captain Whyrrryk's ship was designed for the express purpose of going head-to-head against that larger vessel in fast attacks, and A'baht could only pray it was up for the task, because he didn't know how much longer *Yakez* and *Charnak* could hold out taking fire from the rear.

“General,” L’toth said, “We’re picking up four squadrons of TIE Defenders inbound.”

Well, that was the end of that. “Tell the fighter screen to intercept. Are the Rouges and Wraiths with us?”

“Yes sir, and the last two skiprays from Spotter Squadron.”

“Tell the Spotters to hold back. Everyone else needs to engage those Defenders. Rogues, Wraiths, everyone.”

“Understood. General, I think-”

Before L’toth could get out another word the tactical officer called, “Sirs, another ship has just dropped out of hyperspace.”

And it just kept getting worse. “What kind of ship, Lieutenant?”

After a grave pause, the officer said, “It’s *Dominion*.”

The bridge went silent. The seven-kilometer-long *Bellator*-class destroyer had turned the tide at Orinda, and had come to do so again here. The only difference was that Sovv’s two interdicator cruisers had a gravity well up over half the system, and it would take *Dominion* time to cross it at sublight speeds.

That left them a very small window to break the impasse.

A’baht hurried over to the comm station. “Get me a link with *Lusankya*. I need to talk to Bel Iblis right now.”

“I’ll try, sir, but the Imps are putting out a lot of jamming,” the comm officer said. After a long moment, he said, “I can get you audio but no visual.”

“Good enough. Patch it into my personal comlink,” A’baht said. He removed it from his uniform pocket and brought it to his mouth. “*Lusankya*, this is *Charnak*. Can you hear me?”

After a short, too-long pause, Bel Iblis said, “I hear you, *Charnak*.”

“General Bel Iblis, I have a plan. It’s unusual, but I believe it will work.”

“Right now, we need the unexpected. Go on.”

A’baht explained as quickly as he could. When he was done he waited for what again seemed far too long before

Bel Iblis said, "Can you do it with the forces you have now?"

"Do I have another choice?"

"I suppose not. Good luck, General."

"Thank you. We'll do our best."

A'baht turned off his comlink and took a breath. He turned and saw L'toth staring up at him. He'd probably heard the whole thing.

"General, do you really think that can work?" he asked.

Five minutes ago, he hadn't. A'baht wasn't sure if he did now, but *Dominion's* sudden arrival had changed everything.

"There's only one way to find out," he said, and turned back to the comm lieutenant. "Get me Rogue Leader right away."

"You heard me right," Wedge said, "We're forming up on those gunships and *Noralka*."

"They're going *into* the asteroid belt?" Gavin asked. He sounded as shocked and incredulous as Tycho felt. *Noralka* was smaller than the Dornean ship or the two star destroyers, but the MC40 light cruiser was still bound to get chewed up by all the space rocks.

"Those gunships can track asteroids and keep *Noralka* clear," Wedge said. "We'll give them the help they need."

"Where did you even *get* these orders?" asked Face.

"Direct from General A'baht. Okayed by Bel Iblis. What more do you want?"

Nobody answered that. Tycho would have preferred something sane, but given that *Dominion* was going to arrive soon, they really didn't have any other choices.

At least it would get them away from these damned TIE Defenders. The Wraiths had just lost their second pilot to the 181st.

"We'll leave the other squads to tangle with Phennir," Wedge said. "Everyone else, form up on me."

Tycho obeyed. He and his flight settled behind the Corellian gunship *Cerulean* as it dove toward the asteroid

belt. None of the Imperial pilots seemed foolish enough to follow, not even the 181st ones. They still had plenty to keep them occupied; several flights began making attack runs on *Kenobi* as it desperately tried to fight off the star destroyer in front of it after suddenly being deprived of its gunships.

The DP20 gunships *Viridian* and *Cerulean* dove into the belt first. Their directional laser turrets, usually used for anti-starfighter purposes, blew large asteroids down to space dusts and cleaved a hole for *Noralka* to pass through. The Rouges and Wraiths flitted around the MC40 and the gunships, using their laser cannons to blast every large chunk of space rock they could see.

As Tycho knew would happen, they ended up filling the space around them with many small pieces instead of a relatively few big ones. Again and again, asteroid debris came up on him before he could spot it and rocked against his shields. The only good thing about their second dip into the asteroid belt was the fact that they no longer had to fight off TIEs, and could therefore shut off their energy shields and shunt all defensive power to the particle ones.

He'd just popped one asteroid off the side of *Cerulean* when he spotted a rock spinning fast toward *Noralka*. It wasn't huge- maybe about the size of a Corellian freighter- but that might be big enough to tear through the shields and do serious damage to the command deck. He dropped his targeting reticules on them and opened fire with his laser cannons. Most of these asteroids had significant amounts of ice in them and broke apart easily when hit by burst of plasma, but this one was all stone, and his shots only knocked it slightly off course.

He swore and switched to torpedoes. He only had two left and he wasn't even sure if that would be enough.

Then another X-wing shot forward over *Noralka*'s dorsal ridge. Laser-blasts took the asteroid head-on, slowing its approach. Two torpedoes lanced out and nailed the asteroid, exploding its center and scattering it into chunks of rock that *Noralka* could easily deflect.

“Nice flying, Wraith Two,” he told Cheriss.

“This is a different kind of duel than I’m used to,” she said, and he could hear the pride in her voice.

“You’re doing fine. Now form on my wing. We’re almost at our target.”

Tycho and Cheriss pulled alongside each other and pointed their noses directly ahead, at the bulk of the World Devastator they’d crippled with the help of Spotter Squadron. Its aft section was slowly being gnawed away by the smaller asteroids that drifted along the edge of the belt, but its forward side still faced the raging battle between *Reaper* and *Lusankya*.

“Okay everyone,” Wedge said, “Let’s clear the road one more time.”

As the gunships held back on *Noralka*’s flank, the Wraiths and Rogues bounded ahead to blast away the remaining asteroids in between the light cruiser and the World Devastator. Once the path was clear, they fell back to the capital ships’ flanks. More rocks were drifting in their path all the time and they had to keep flying circles to keep the ships clear.

Still, they’d gotten through it all without losing anyone. Tycho was glad of it, but the really impossible part was what came next.

Noralka, *Viridian*, and *Cerulean* pushed themselves close to the Devastator’s battered rear section. The asteroids had chewed up the hull enough that the section’s turbolaser batteries were non-operational, which meant all three could get close enough to lock their tractor beams onto different sections of the Devastator.

To Tycho, sitting in his X-wing, it was an absurd sight. Those three capital ships, just small enough that they could slip through the asteroid field without getting pulverized, were absolutely minuscule in comparison to the Devastator. Getting right up close to it strengthened their tractor beams’ grip on the World Devastator’s hull, though, and when they started to push the World Devastator forward they were

working together with the front pair of repulsorlifts on the opposite side of the craft.

Slowly, impossibly, absurdly, those three little rebel ships gave the Devastator the boost it had been wanting, and began to push it out of the asteroid field, toward *Reaper's* narrow, pointed bow.

“General, they’re moving!”

L’toth’s voice trembled, part with excitement and part with disbelief, but there was no denying it. A’baht could see it with his own eyes: the edge of the World Devastator was being pushed out of the asteroid field and toward *Reaper*.

Pellaeon’s flagship didn’t seem to notice yet; it was continuing its long brawl with *Lusankya*. It might notice soon, and that mean a distraction was in order.

“Comm,” A’baht called, “Contact Captain Whyrrryk. Tell her to push ahead now. And tell Carson to hold tight on our flank. We’re pushing through.”

It was a bold move, trying to smash through the screen of TIE Defenders and Howlrunners and break the Impstar guarding *Reaper's* starboard flank, but like the trick with the broken Devastator, it was the only move they had to make.

Captain Whyrrryk’s vessel seemed to move forward eagerly. It pushed through the enemy fighters, even as they started dropping missiles and torpedoes against its hull and shifted slightly so it would pass broadsides with the enemy destroyer.

“Captain L’toth,” A’baht announced, “Take us in on that Impstar’s right flank.”

“Yes, sir,” L’toth said. He almost sounded eager. Likely he was happy to finally break free from the two destroyers that had been pounding away at their aft shields.

The destroyer in front of them suddenly found itself getting pounded from both sides. Squeezed between *Kenobi* and *Charnak*, her shields became awash with flame until they started to crumble. *Kenobi* landed a volley of missiles on her midsection and *Charnak* directed a turbolaser spray

that destroyer her port cannons. Finally, a flight of K-wing bombers from *Yakez* managed to break through a screen of Howlrunners and drop their eggs directly on the destroyer's command tower, vaporizing the entire bridge in an instant.

Yakez, *Charnak* and *Kenobi* powered past the dying vessel, pummeling it as hard as they could before it fell out of weapons range. Their shields were straining hard under continued attacks from the TIE Defenders, but suddenly the dying destroyer was behind them and *Reaper* in front of them.

A'baht hurried over to the front of the bridge as fast as dignity would allow. He peered downward in time to see the crippled World Devastator as it was pushed right in front of *Reaper*. As three new vessels started hitting *Reaper*'s starboard shields, the Devastator's voracious furnace continued to burn. *Reaper*'s tip slid forward, right into its mouth.

The World Devastator was barely big enough to swallow an *Imperial*-class star destroyer. *Reaper* was far too massive to fit inside that maw, but getting the tip inside was enough. The destroyer's shields began to shudder. More attacks from either flank slipped through and began to eat at the superstructure. Finally, the Devastator's furnace began to overload. The massive machine burst in an impressive explosion that raced up *Reaper*'s nose, tearing up more of its hull. The explosion died out, but not before consuming nearly the first third of *Reaper*'s nineteen-kilometer length.

At that point, all of its shields collapsed. Bel Iblis tore at it from one side, A'baht from the other. Its engines struggled, failed. It had no place left to run.

It was one of the worst disasters of his life and the Empire's, almost on par with Endor or Bilbringi. Maybe because he'd been through it all before, Gilad Pellaeon was strangely calm, even as the bridge trembled and alarms wailed and *Reaper* was torn apart from every side.

Reige staggered forward and grabbed him by the shoulders. "Admiral! We have to hold out! We *can* hold out! Call *Chimaera*, *Judicator*, *Relentless*, call *Nemesis*!"

"*Nemesis* is dead!" Pellaeon reminded her.

They'd just seen it overwhelmed by three other ships. It had provided critical distraction as the rebels shoved that crippled World Devastator right onto *Reaper*'s nose.

Reige blinked twice. She licked her lips and said, "We just need to wait for *Dominion*, Admiral. Once Rogriss gets here—"

In all the years Pellaeon had known her, he'd never seen Reige like this. He shook his again and said, "It's too late, Molgarin! We have to abandoned ship!"

No!" Reige shouted, but on this frantic bridge nobody even noticed. "Sir, this was... this was our symbol, our *hope*. We *need* this ship!"

"We need to *survive*." Pellaeon squeezed her shoulders hard. "Survive, Colonel!"

He couldn't be caught by Reige's stupor any longer. He lurched across the shaking deck to the comm station, grabbed its lieutenant by the shoulder, and said, "Give the order. All hands, abandoned ship."

The lieutenant swallowed. "Understood, sir."

"Tell the other destroyers to pick up as many escape pods as they can. And tell—"

"Admiral, all external comms are down."

They'd do it anyway. He knew Dorja and Brandei, Ardiffe and Harbid. He trusted them. They wouldn't fail him as he'd failed them.

"Just give the order, Lieutenant," Pellaeon's words scraped in his throat. "*Reaper* is lost."

The Battle of Celanon was decided the moment *Reaper*'s bow dipped into the mouth of the World Devastator, but the fighting didn't stop for hours.

With her main hangar still down, *Reaper*'s crew evacuated through her auxiliary launch bay and threw themselves into

escape pods. The other star destroyers broke off their fights with the New Republic vessels and grabbed as many of the pods as they could. The Republic vessels did not let up the fighting; the Imperial star destroyer *Tyrant* lost her engines after a long fight with *Mon Casima* and surrendered to Admiral Sovv, while *Death's Head* took a series of crippling blows from *Kenobi* and *Yakez* and barely lasted until *Dominion* finally arrived on the battle scene. Once the second super star destroyer came, Bel Iblis broke the battered *Lusankya* away and moved his fleet to the inner side of the asteroid belt.

For a long, anxious moment, it seemed like the battle might dip into a long standoff, followed by a second phase of fighting, but in the end, *Dominion* gathered up as many ships and escape pods as it could from *Reaper*, then tore the dead destroyer apart with volley after volley of turbolaser fire. The concussive force of the attack kicked *Reaper* into the asteroid belt, where millions of chunks of floating space rock further carved away at the ship's massive corpse, ruining it beyond all salvage.

With that done, *Dominion* and the remaining five star destroyers jumped to hyperspace, leaving Celanon firmly in New Republic hands.

Naturally, the celebrations went on for hours on every ship.

Lusankya's secondary hangar bay was pandemonium as the Rogues and Wraiths flew in to roost. Republic pilots clambered out of their battered starfighters and ran around the deck, shouting and hugging. Tycho was half-tackled by some ecstatic Elom and kissed by a Togruta he didn't even know before he finally found where the other Rogues and Wraiths had clustered, around Wes Janson's unmistakable black-and-yellow checkerboard X-wing.

Janson was swinging a bottle of something foamy around, accidentally spraying half the people around him, until Kell Tainer plucked it from his hand and downed the whole thing. Piggy and Runt were arm-in-arm and you could almost make out smiles on their big unhuman faces. Kral Nevil was

explaining some maneuver to Ligg Panat with his hands while Alin Varth looked on. Gavin was telling something to Inyri while Face listened over the din and nodded eagerly.

Tycho finally found Wedge and Hobbie standing behind Janson's X-wings, between the jutting engine nacelles. They had Cheriss with them. The woman looked pale and breathless rather than exuberant and Tycho wondered if something had happened to her; he couldn't see any physical damage.

When Hobbie spotted him, he called waved him forward and patted him on the shoulder. "Good flying, Tycho!"

"Yeah, I can't believe that worked." Tycho ran a hand through his messy brown hair. "Feel good to be in the cockpit again, Wedge?"

"Feels good to be out of it, too." Wedge gave one of his trademark weary smiles.

Tycho shifted his attention to Cheriss. "Are you hanging in there, Wraith Two?"

"Best I can, sir." She gave him a tired smile of her own. "That was... unlike anything I've ever done."

"Hmmm..." Tycho tubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Honestly, that was unlike anything *I've* ever done too."

"Yeah, I've never shoved a World Devastor into a super star destroyer and made 'em kiss before," Hobbie nodded. "Have you, Wedge?"

"Not to my knowledge." He said, then added, "Hell of a kiss though, wasn't it?"

"Not one the Imps'll forget," Tycho said.

"They've still got *Dominion*," Hobbie warned. "Who knows what they'll do next."

"Don't look at me." Wedge held up both hands. "I haven't talked to Bel Iblis, or Sovv, or A'baht, or anyone else. So I have no idea about the larger strategic implications or any of that. I was just a pilot today."

"Good day to be one," Tycho said. "Right, Cheriss?"

She seemed to hesitate before answering. Tycho wasn't sure how much he wanted to press her, or if she'd already

had some kind of serious talk with Wedge and Hobbie, but before she could say anything, he heard a loud cry behind him and felt a body sag against his shoulder.

“Woo!” Janson yelled, “Hell of a place for a party, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, you could say that,” Wedge laughed a little as Janson threw an arm over his shoulder too.

“Hey, Wedge, c’mon, they’re gonna start dancing any minute now. People are *that* happy. C’mon, let’s go, let’s dance. You’re a great dancer, Wedge, even better than me.”

“Wes, you’re drunk.”

“No, you think? C’mon, Wedge, let’s show ‘em that Ewok dance.”

“Wes, really, I don’t think-”

“Come *on* Wedge,” Janson said. “I want holos of it this time! We can show it at your wedding party!”

He dragged Wedge around the garish X-wing by the shoulders. On the way, he hooked an arm around Hobbies and dragged him too.

Tycho was pleased to see Cheriss laughing, girlish and easy, as she watched them go. Looking down at her, he asked, “Are you okay, Cheriss? Really?”

Her face went serious; she swallowed and said, “It was a pretty overwhelming.”

“It was overwhelming for all of us. It was one of the biggest, messiest fights I’ve ever been in, and you know that says a lot.”

“There were times when I thought...” She trailed off, then said, “I think I need more training. Proper training. The Wraiths, they’re an informal unit, so they could just take me on, but I think I need to jump through some proper hoops, if you get what I mean. I need some proper training.”

Tycho smiled in relief. For a while he’d been wondering whether she wanted to quit flying all together. He put a hand on her shoulder and said, “Get all the proper training you need. I can set you up with some fine instructors. And when you’re ready, I’ll be happy to fly on your wing.”

“Thank you,” she said. “This isn’t the future I thought I would have, but... I’m glad I have it. I’m glad I know where I’m going.”

With that, she slipped around to the other side of Janson’s X-wing to take part in whatever festivities were still going strong there. Tycho found he couldn’t join them. For all the still-strong adrenaline and happy clamor, he felt hollow inside.

He knew what it was. Cheriss had laid it out for him with a single word: *future*.

The Empire would have a hard time recovering from the loss of *Reaper*, even if they did have another super star destroyer or two in their pocket. There was no way to know for sure, but Tycho was betting they’d fall back, consolidate their holdings, and lick their wounds for a time. If hostilities resumed, it wouldn’t be happening for six months or more.

Whatever happened then, the weight on everyone’s shoulders since Orinda had been lifted now. The future was something they *could* plan for with confidence for the first time in a while.

There was really only one way to deal with that. Tycho knew what it was. He’d known it for a long time, and for a long time he’d kept making excuses.

Tycho turned his back on the celebration in the hangar bay. He doubted anyone even noticed he was gone.

He made his way through *Lusankya*’s halls until he found his quarters. He locked the door to his small room, fired up the HoloNet transceiver, and put in a call to Coruscant.

The reply was a long time coming, but when it did, he found himself looking at a Winter with tousled hair, gummy eyes, and a bathrobe slipping off one shoulder.

“Tycho?” she asked, blinking repeatedly. “Do you have any idea what time it is?”

He didn’t. He hadn’t even considered the local time on Galactic City when he made the call. “Sorry, I didn’t think.”

Winter’s eyes went wide with realization. “Tycho, is everything okay? What happened at Celanon?”

“We *won*.” He leaned forward. He knew what he wanted to ask but was suddenly nervous, more anxious than he’d been charging World Devastators just hours ago.

“What does that mean, *won*? Did you take the planet? Did you-”

“*Reaper*’s been destroyed,” Tycho said. “The Empire’s lost its flagship.”

“Oh,” Winter breathed out. “Oh, Tycho, that’s *fantastic*. I can’t believe Wes’ crazy plan worked.”

“Not for the first time.” Tycho smiled stiffly.

Apparently Winter couldn’t spot his nervousness, or the holo was just bad, because she went on, “Do you have any idea what happens now? Has Bel Iblis made a statement?”

“Nothing that we’ve heard, but the battle just ended. I’m sure the Imps need to figure out what *they* want after this.”

“What about Pellaeon? Is he-”

“I have no idea.”

“It might be better if he *did* survive. He’s got a more level head than most of the Moff’s. He might convince them to hold onto their possessions without trying another offensive.”

“Winter,” he said softly.

“He might even try to get them to sue for peace. I know it’s a long way off, but-”

“Winter,” he repeated.

She stopped, blinked again. “What is it, Tycho?”

He leaned a little closer to the holo. “We won’t know how the Empire will react for a couple days at least, but we can still plan for the future.”

“Well, yes, I’m sure NRI’s already putting up all sorts of-”

“*Our* future, Winter.”

She stopped, a stared at him across countless lightyears. This was the sort of thing that should have been done in-person, when they could see each other with real eyes, touch and smell and taste each other, but right there, in *Lusankya*’s hangar, it had suddenly become crucial that he do this right now.

Her lips slanted into that wry smile of hers. “Wedge got to you, did he?”

“Maybe a little,” Tycho admitted, “But this is my choice and I’ve been putting it off for far too long.”

He leaned forward even closer, until he could see a little light of hope in her holo-blurred eyes, and asked, “Winter, will you marry me?”

Pellaeon’s return to *Chimaera* wasn’t the kind of homecoming he’d wanted or even imagined. All his time on *Reaper*, the ship had felt too big, too empty, and a part of him had wanted to return to the tight halls, small rooms, and familiar worn furniture he’d known for most of his career.

After Celanon, *Chimaera* didn’t feel like home. He’d forgotten how small it was, how old, how battered by battles and memories. It felt like a punishment, and one he’d certainly earned.

He tried, awkwardly, to explain this to Natasi Daala as he commed her on the way back to Bastion, but she didn’t seem to take his message.

“From what you’ve said, it sounds like the rebels got lucky,” she told him.

“That’s not true.” He shook his head as he looked down at her holo in the cabin that had once been his, and which Captain Ardifff was letting him use once more. “They won because they managed one bold feat after another. They weren’t just relying on big ships and firepower, they kept doing the unexpected. They were fighting like the *old* rebels, the ones that killed Palpatine and two Death Stars.”

“I was wondering where they’d went,” she said with a touch of wry humor.

“Something has to change.”

Daala tilted her head thoughtfully. “What kind of change are you talking about, Gil?”

“I don’t know. But what we’ve been doing hasn’t been working. All this time we’ve been trying to fight like the old Empire and we’ve just kept losing.”

“So you want to start aping *rebel* tactics now?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Then what *are* you saying?”

“I’m... I’m not sure. I just know that something needs to change.” He paused, hesitated, then said, “When they call me before the Moff Council, they’ll probably ask for my commission, or at least for me to step down as Supreme Commander. I don’t intend to argue with them.”

“Oh, don’t be an idiot, Gil.”

Her sudden harshness surprised him. “What do you mean?”

“Who else do you think can run the Imperial Navy if not *you*? Who else is even *left*?”

He hadn’t thought about that. There were some officers who might want the job, certainly; old Dorja had never given up on his ambitions. He wondered if Reige would be willing to step up to the role; the woman still acted stricken from the loss of *Reaper*, but Pellaeon had trusted her sharp mind and unwavering loyalty to the Empire ever since she’d first stepped onto *Chimaera*’s bridge. Of course, her experience was more with intelligence and strategy than battefield tactics, and a lot of the Moffs would be loath to appoint a woman as Supreme Commander.

Weakly, he said, “That’s for the Moffs to decide.”

“The Moffs,” Daala snorted. “If I could do to them what I did the warlords, I would.”

Pellaeon couldn’t help but laugh. Still the same old Daala, after everything.

“The Empire needs to make changes to survive, Gilad. If anyone is going to change this Empire, it’s you.”

“Flattery.”

“And the truth.”

“What *kind* of changes, then?”

“Well, they could definitely stand a few more female admials and Moffs, in my opinion.” Daala’s cruel frown curved into a still-fierce smile. “Maybe even some non-humans, if they’re capable enough.”

"You're asking a lot."

"I wouldn't ask anything I don't think you could give me. As to what else, I don't know. But if anyone can think of a way to salvage the Empire, it's you."

"Your confidence astounds me." He said it like a joke, but he meant every word.

"It's like you said. What we've been doing hasn't been working. It's time to try doing something new. It's time to *be* someone new."

Pellaeon shuddered. Her words had shaken him to the core. She could see that, even over the blurry holo.

"Will you help me if I need it?" he asked her. He hadn't asked about Liegeus. He wondered if she was still with him, with her family.

"On Irmenu," she said, "We have a certain legendary hero. He is called Darakaer and he sleeps under the ocean. When someone plays his rhythm on drums they can call for him, and if the need is great, he'll come back from the dead to save his people."

"Are you my Darakaer then, Natasi?"

"Or you're mine. We'll just have to wait and find out together, won't we?"

That one word, *together*, made all the difference.

When he closed off the link with Daala, he stood for a long time in front of the holo-emitter. Like most of the things in the captain's cabin, it was the same as he'd left it. Maybe Ardiff had kept everything like this, just for him, because he'd known that one day Pellaeon would end up back on his *Chimaera* again. He didn't know how to feel about that.

In the end, though, what he felt didn't matter. What he *did* mattered, and there was one very important thing left to do before they arrived at Bastion.

He pulled out his personal comlink and patched in a call to Captain Ardiff on the bridge.

"How may I help you, Admiral?" Ardiff asked.

"Captain, I understand that the One-Eighty-First's Red Squad docked on *Chimaera* before leaving Celanon."

"That's correct, sir."

"Can you locate the squad leader, Lieutenant Devis?"

"One moment," Ardiff said. Pellaeon felt like he waited forever before the captain said, "Lieutenant Devis is in the ready room forward of the auxiliary hangar bay. Would you like me to send him to you?"

The wait until Mynar got to his cabin would be interminable. "No. I'll go find him myself. Thank you, Captain."

Pellaeon immediately turned for the door. He didn't break stride as it slid open before him, but when he turned into the hallway he was immediately by the sight of Molgarin Reige.

The woman half-jumped in surprise. She must have been lingering outside his door, mustering the strength to call him, when he'd come barging out.

The expression on her face reeled his thoughts away from his son. He'd seen that expression once before, on a much younger face, right after Endor. It contained equal parts shock, sorrow, and shame.

But she managed to hold his eyes, stand up straight, and say, "Sir, I'm here to resign my commission."

"Oh, Molgarin," he shook his head.

"I mean it. What happened today was my fault. I should have known *Lusankya* and Bel Iblis were on the move. I should seen it, stopped them."

"Don't, please."

"I *mean* it." Her voice quavered; there was something wet in her eyes. "I can't even imagine what's going to happen next. We still have *Dominion* and *Megador*, but neither of them can match *Lusankya*. We might have to surrender more sectors, or—"

He put a hand on her shoulder. A current ran between them, a memory of what once had been. He said, "Things are going to have to change, Molgarin. Lots of things. I'm going to need your help."

"Me?" She blinked. "After what I did today—"

"You didn't *do* anything. Neither did I. That's the problem. We've been relying on big battleships and the rebels have relied on their wits. It's no surprise we lost today."

"Gilad, I don't think I can help you."

"I'm going to need good people, people I can trust, people who can help me shove change down the throats of people like Flennic and Disra."

She looked skeptical. "Do you really think I'm the person you need?"

"I do." He squeezed her shoulder a little. "And if it's any consolation, I just had someone talk *me* out of resigning."

That didn't seem to cheer her. "Do you think they'll even *let* us keep our positions?"

"That's in the hands of the Moff Council, but I've learned for to deal with them. Just hold on, Molgarin. We just have to be willing to change." He took his hand off her shoulder, stepped away. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have something else to do."

She blinked, confused. "Talk to the Moffs?"

"No." He smiled a little. "My son."

She didn't say anything as he walked away. She just watched him go.

It was a long walk from the captain's cabin down to the secondary pilots' ready room, but walking felt good. It kept him from thinking too hard about the things behind him and in front of him.

When he got to the pilots' room he found a noisy, messy place that smelled of sweat and alcohol. He hadn't spent time in places like this since before the Clone Wars. Surprising nostalgia washed over him, but only for a moment. When the pilots saw him they all jumped off the chairs and sofa, threw down their cards and bottles, and snapped their best salutes.

Mynar Devis was in the middle of them, standing in front of a table with sabacc cards laid face-down.

"I'd like to speak to Lieutenant Devis," Pellaeon said. "May we have some privacy?"

Exhausted, depressed, or alcohol-woozy, it didn't matter. They were still soldiers of the Empire and they knew how to follow orders as quickly as possible. Within thirty seconds it was just Pellaeon and Devis, staring at each other across an abandoned card-table.

"Can I help you with anything, sir?" Devis asked, still saluting.

"At ease, Lieutenant. Please."

"Yes, sir." He lowered his hand but didn't relax.

Pellaeon stared at that expectant face, those big Hallena-like eyes. After talking with Daala he'd known what had to be done, but now that he was here, staring at Devis, he didn't know how to actually *do* it.

There was no point in beating around it, playing formal, not now. He asked, "Lieutenant Devis, what did your mother tell you about your father?"

Confusion flickered over his face. "I believe I already told you, sir. It wasn't much. She just said he was a naval officer, and that he was dead."

"Did she say where or how?"

"No. She didn't like to talk about him, I don't think."

"Why was that?"

"Well, I never knew exactly. Like I said, she died when I was young."

"When she talked about him, was she angry? Sad?"

"I'd say sad, sir. That's what I remember, but it was a long time ago."

"And you've set yourself to serving the Empire, have you?"

"That's right, sir," he said firmly.

How Hallena would have hated that. She would have hated the way she'd died too, something mundane and stupid, something that abandoned her son to be molded by forces she couldn't control and didn't like. It was such a sad waste of a woman's life.

The grief must have shown in his face. Devis asked, "Are you all right, sir?"

“Of course, Lieutenant. I was just... remembering.”

Cautiously, Devis said, “Remembering what, sir?”

It was time to come out with it. There was no point in going back. “I was remembering your mother.”

Devis stared, unspeaking.

“Lieutenant,” Pellaeon said, “I am your father.”

The younger man still stared at him. His eyes had gone distant, like they were staring back at all the pieces of his life, trying to make sense of them in light of this new revelation.

“I never knew about you,” Pellaeon said, “Not until, well, until Orinda. Your mother and I... we parted before you were born. On bad terms. I am sorry, so sorry, that I was never here for you before now.”

He noticed for the first time that Devis was trembling. The man grabbed the back of his chair with one shaking and awkwardly lowered himself into it. It screeched across the tile as he sat down.

“Hallena Devis was a very special woman to me,” Pellaeon said, “When she left... the way she left... I tried very hard to put it all out of my mind. I never thought a day like this would come. I thought she, and everything she ever meant to me... was gone.”

Devis blinked, licked dry lips, and finally looked up at his father. “What happens now?” he asked.

Pellaeon stepped close enough to touch his son for the first time. He laid one hand on his shoulder and said, “The future is something the two of us are going to figure out. Together.”

PART VII: VENGEANCE

37 YEARS ABY

It took a mere three-quarters of a standard second for *Megador*'s navigational systems to compute the amount of time it would take them to get from Yaga Minor to the source of Molgarin Reige's distress call: six hours.

Six hours was a long time to wait.

Vitor Reige put his crew on red alert thirty minutes after they jumped to hyperspace. By that time, Pellaeon had finished his last-minute calls and preparations. After that, distractions were exhausted, and there was nothing left for them to do but stir anxiously on the bridge.

They were both up there, Pellaeon and Reige, pacing, checking on the crew stations, harassing the poor lieutenants and ensigns who were almost as nervous as they were. Both men consciously avoided each other's eyes; they worked tight movements around each other and said nothing aloud about the woman they were both terrified that they'd already lost.

A part of Pellaeon knew he could have at least attempted something more. He could have pulled Vitor aside, gave his best assurances that together they would save his mother, but Vitor was too smart to believe them and it would only sharpen the fear both felt at the prospect of losing Molgarin Reige. Mother or friend, she meant more to them than either were used to putting into words.

All the same, Pellaeon could have done better. He *had* done better once, with Mynar. After he'd revealed himself

to Hallena's son, the two had slowly settled into a relationship close to what a father and son should have had. After the disaster at Celanon, the Empire had retreated deeper into its critical territories, giving up more sectors to the New Republic with minimal fight. There had only been one major campaign afterward, climaxing at the Battle of Anx Minor, where *Megador* and *Dominion* both took heavy damage from *Guardian* under Admiral Ackbar's command. The 181st had fought in that battle and survived, and just two years later Pellaeon sat down with New Republic president Ponc Gavrisom aboard *Chimaera* and signed a formal cessation of hostilities.

But even without a war to fight, Pellaeon had been a soldier. So had Mynar. Pellaeon had spent most of his time on Bastion, while Mynar had gotten a ship of his own, the interdictor *Wrack*, alternately stationed at Yaga Minor or the capital. When he was at Bastion, father and son would meet once a week or once a month, like an adult parents and children were supposed to do. Pellaeon's parentage had never been made public, and he'd shared the truth only with a close handful, including both Molgarin and Vitor Reige.

And then the Vong came, and Mynar died in an act of terrible heroism, and with Mynar gone Pellaeon had been left with Vitor, who may have been his blood son too, but after losing Mynar, he had become more dead-set than ever on not knowing the truth. Even when they returned to peacetime, he didn't want to know, because he'd seen too many wars to think war done forever, and losing one son was already more than any man deserved.

And so, because of Mynar, because of the strict military reserve he'd pounded into himself since he was young and used as a shield against so many losses in so many wars, Gilad Pellaeon didn't talk to Vitor on the bridge, didn't offer words of comfort or encourage or (worst of all) hope.

Like Vitor, he simply waited.

In the end, he didn't have to wait nearly as long as he'd been expecting.

Megador's commanders and crew might have been on her bridge, waiting for the fight to start, but they were still taken aback when, just four-and-a-half hours outbound from Yaga Minor, the super star destroyer was roughly yanked out of hyperspace by an interdiction field.

The inertial jerk of their reversion to realspace nearly knocked Pellaeon to the ground. He would have fallen over except for Vitor; the captain dashed out of nowhere and caught the old man right before his kneecaps cracked against the deck.

Once Reige had helped steady Pellaeon, both men turned their heads up and looked out the forward viewport.

Their jaws dropped open as one.

Pellaeon's eyes set first on two pale wedges hovering maybe twenty kilometers ahead of them. One was an *Interdictor*-class destroyer, bulging with four spherical gravity well projectors. The other was an *Imperial*-class vessel. In his many years of service, Pellaeon had gotten good at recognizing the tiny modifications and patches that separated one old destroyer from another. He thought this one might be the aged *Judicator*, once Captain Brandei's ship, now someone else's; Brandei had gone out like Aren Dorja, in his bed, in peacetime.

Molgarin Reige had taken *Judicator* to patrol the coreward border.

Pellaeon a moment, he understood nothing. Then his eyes found the blackness that blocked out stars.

It sat between *Megador* and the other two destroyers, shielding them from any attack. It was as long as *Megador*, shaped like *Megador*, a colossal sword stabbing through space. Its hull, all of it, was a vivid night-black, in perfect contrast to *Megador's* off-white.

Pellaeon looked on the super star destroyer *Vengeance* for the first time in thirty-three years and couldn't believe what his eyes were telling him.

He still couldn't believe, not really, even when the communications officer reported, "Sir, we're being hailed

by the super star destroyer. She'd identifying herself as *Vengeance*."

Awed whispers ran through across the crew pits, much of it confused. Many of those men hadn't even been born when *Vengeance* cut through the post-Endor fleet conference, or when it had fled to the Deep Core after its architect and master, the High Inquisitor Jerec, had been killed by the Jedi.

When Pellaeon didn't respond, Reige squeezed his shoulder gently. "Admiral? Should we respond?"

Pellaeon kept staring. He stared at *Vengeance*, at *Judicator*, at the interdictor, and tried to put the pieces together. They seemed like they were falling into a pattern he dreaded to face.

"Sir," the comm officer repeated, "We're being hailed again. She's asking for you personally."

"She?" Reige asked.

"Ah, yes." The lieutenant swallowed. "It's *Admiral* Reige, sir. She wants to speak with Grand Admiral Pellaeon."

Pellaeon staggered upright and pulled himself away from a shocked Vitor. He stood up straight, squared his shoulders, tried to look like the best grand admiral possible, and said, "Lieutenant, patch her into my personal comlink."

"Gladly, sir."

Pellaeon pulled his comlink from his chest pocket and stalked stiffly to the rear of the bridge. He made sure he was too far away to be heard and turned so that the crew could only watch his back. Then he flicked the comlink on.

He said, "This is the Grand Admiral."

She said, "Hello, Gilad."

"Admiral Riege, I order you to explain yourself. Immediately."

Reige's sigh crackled over the comlink. "I want to, very much, but I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to come over to *Vengeance*."

"And if I refuse?"

"I'll open fire, naturally."

“Admiral, Vitor is here, on this bridge. I don’t know what your feelings to me are any more, but I can’t believe you’d open fire on your own *son*.”

“I don’t want that either. That’s why you should come over to *Vengeance*.”

“As what? Your prisoner?”

“I only want to talk.”

“About what?”

“About saving the Empire, Gilad. Something you’ve forgotten how to do.”

He’d been reproached like that before, from Flennic and Disra, from Aren Dorja and other hard-headed captains and Moff’s who refused to recognize that the old Empire was forever gone and whatever they were now had to adapt to a changing galaxy.

He never thought he’d heard it from Molgarin, and it wounded him beyond words.

She said, “It took a lot of doing, but this ship is back to full combat status. Check your scanners. You’ll see that we’re a perfect match for *Megador*, and we have two more star destroyers besides. We’ve also begun jamming your long-range HoloNet transmissions.”

He thought he’d been prepared for anything, but he wasn’t prepared for this. She had outplayed him, probably in ways he wouldn’t even comprehend until he saw her, talked to her face-to-face.

And that was what he’d have to do. He found he *wanted* to see her, to look her in the eye. It was the only way he’d understand any of this.

“I’ll come alone,” he said. “Vitor stays on *Megador*.”

“Very well.”

“And I’ll need time to prepare. Thirty minutes.”

“Fifteen.”

“Twenty.”

He heard what might have been a fond sigh. “All right, Gilad. But if your shuttle is not on its way in twenty minutes, we will open fire.”

He didn't doubt that. He asked, "What guarantee do I have that you won't shoot down my shuttle?"

There was a long, pregnant pause. Finally, she said, "I would never kill you without telling you why."

He must have been a sentimental old fool after all, because he found he believed her. He said, "All right. Twenty minutes."

Pellaeon turned the comlink off but kept his held it to his mouth while he gathered his thoughts and his crew kept staring at his back in hushed anticipation and dread.

Then, when he decided what to do, he turned and walked straight for Vitor Reige.

The captain was doing his best to hide his emotions, but when Pellaeon got close he could see the shock and confusion in the younger man's eyes.

Pellaeon put one hand on his shoulder and held those eyes. "Captain, are you with me?"

Reige gave a jerking nod. "I can do what you need me to, sir. I promise."

"Good." Pellaeon gave his shoulder a squeeze. "Now listen carefully and do exactly as I say."

For a second Tycho Celchu forgot himself, and in frustration he punched the face of the communications console with a clenched fist. He immediately regretted it for the sting in his knuckles and the looks it drew from across *Charnak's* bridge. All those Dorneans were too stony to comment on it, even Been L'toth and Etahn A'baht as they stood just behind Tycho, staring down at the comm system.

A lieutenant, also stony-faced, said, "I'm sorry, sir, but we just can't get a line to *Megador*."

"Admiral Niathal gave me her personal communications codes." Tycho shook his head. "Pellaeon should have picked up."

"We could try calling Yaga Minor," L'toth suggested. "I believe Pellaeon was supposed to have stationed himself there."

"All right," Tycho pushed hair off a forehead gone damp with nervous sweat. "Patch us in. Tell them it's an emergency."

As the comm lieutenant got to work, A'baht pressed in close to Tycho's side. The old general said, in a low voice, "If there's an explanation for all of this, I'd like to know."

He was right to ask for one. The moment they'd picked up Tycho's shuttle at Adumar, he'd ordered them back to the edge of Imperial space, even crossing the five-parsec boundary Pellaeon had warned Niathal about. He'd put this entire ship in danger and barely paused to think about the men whose lives he was risking.

"It's a long story," Tycho warned. He wanted to talk to Yaga Minor first, assuming Pellaeon was even still there. His gut told him he wouldn't be, that they were already too late.

Nonetheless, A'baht took his meaning. The Dornean's small eyes darted to the comm lieutenant, who was pressing his earpiece to the side of his head and listening closely.

A few moments later, the lieutenant said, "This is the Alliance cruiser *Charnak* with General Tycho Celchu aboard. We have an emergency message for Grand Admiral Pellaeon. We were unable to hail *Megador* and- I'm sorry, can you repeat that? I see. Yes. Of course. I see. Thank you. *Charnak*, out."

"He's not there, is he?" Tycho asked, even before the lieutenant turned to face him.

"I'm sorry, General. They said *Megador* jumped to hyperspace over four hours ago."

"Jumped *where*?" asked A'baht.

"They wouldn't say, sirs. They only said it was an emergency."

"We haven't heard of any more attacks," L'toth said.

"Not on this side of the border. At this point, they've probably put a freeze on all their convoys." A'baht looked thoughtful. "Captain, how many prowlers do we have left aboard?"

"We have three." L'toth glanced at Tycho, like he wanted him to say that sending scout ships into potentially hostile territory at a time of a crisis was a really terribly idea and shouldn't even be considered.

L'toth was right, but Tycho didn't see what other options they had.

"Captain, send prowlers over the border on my authorization," Tycho said, knowing full well that he might have just thrown away his career.

Discomfort showed on L'toth's face, but he nodded anyway. "Right away, sir."

As the captain went off to oversee the deployment of prowlers, A'baht leaned close to Tycho again and said, "Can we get some explanation *now*?"

"All right. But not here."

"We'll use Been's ready-room then."

A'baht marched off for the captain's office, and Tycho followed him. When the door slid shut behind them, A'baht spun around on Tycho and said, "You've found out who's behind these attacks, haven't you?"

"I don't know *who*. But I'm pretty sure *what*."

"Explain."

"When I was on Adumar, I visited Teren Rogriss. He's a former Imperial admiral-"

"I know who Rogriss is. I was at Orinda. What did he say?"

Tycho wasn't going to unravel the entire story of the Corellian search party in the Deep Core, and the former Imperial spy who'd sold them the location. That was beyond need-to-know for a retired general. "Rogriss remembered a conversation with an old spook, back before he left the Empire. This spook got a little too drunk and spilled this story about how Warlord Teradoc was trying to refit an old super star destroyer, *Vengeance*, at one of his hidden Deep Core bases. Rogriss didn't believe him at the time and forgot about it all. But now-

"This destroyer is performing the attacks." A'baht considered. "That does seem aligned with what we've gleaned about the attackers."

"KDY thrusters, overwhelming turbolaser attacks, the works." Tycho nodded.

"But what about the recording? Everyone's seen it. The Imperials are broadcasting it everywhere so they can show off that Mon Cal cruiser slaughtering their cargo ships."

"Admiral Niathal put her asset tracking people on that video. I talked to her just before I left Adumar. No two Mon Cal cruisers are identical, so they were able to pin it down as *Poesy*."

A'baht blinked. "She was destroyed during the Vong war."

"At Duro. Exactly."

"So it was faked. But they must have known someone would catch that."

"Does it matter? We can deny that video all we want, but all the citizens in the Remnant have already seen *the most* iconic kind of ship in the Alliance blow away a bunch of innocent civilians."

"So you think this whole thing has been some elaborate false-flag attack? That someone's been trying to drive a wedge between the Alliance and the Remnant?"

Tycho nodded. "Maybe even start a war."

"That's madness. The Empire can't fight off the whole galaxy. That's not just arrogance, that's staggering stupidity."

"I know. I think it's more likely they want to cut all ties to the Alliance and bunker down."

"But *who* is behind it? Not Pellaeon."

"Definitely not. I don't know enough about Imp politics to make a guess, but wherever Pellaeon is now, he's in danger."

"He still has *Megador*."

"Yes, and his enemies have the only ship in the galaxy capable of going toe-to-toe with it."

“So is that what our prowlers are looking for, then? A big light show? Lots of debris?”

“I don’t know. I’m hoping we get there before then.”

“And do *what*? This is one cruiser, General, and old one. What do you think we can do?”

Tycho didn’t have an answer. He didn’t know. He only knew they had to try.

Turr Phennir felt fundamentally out of place as he stood at the front of the stormtrooper column receiving Grand Admiral Pellaeon in *Vengeance*’s yawning hangar bay.

He would have at least felt better in his uniform, black with red bloodstripes. He would have felt like a general again. As it was, he was in the same civilian suit he’d hopped Bastion in.

When Pellaeon came down the ramp in that perfect white uniform, it made him feel even more inadequate. Nonetheless, he drew himself up straight and let the old man’s eyes meet his own. There was no surprise in them; Phennir didn’t how to feel about that. Pellaeon seemed to stand there at the base of the landing ramp, staring at him for a long time, before the grand admiral finally spoke.

“So, you’ve come out of retirement.”

“It seems that way,” Phennir said evenly.

Pellaeon made a show of looking around the empty hangar. “Tell me, General Phennir, how long have you been involved in this plot?”

“Not very. I only learned of this ship a few hours ago.”

“So this was Admiral Reige’s project, was it?”

“Her and Moff Flennic, as I understand it.” He wondered what he should tell Pellaeon. He’d probably figured that much already.

Pellaeon puffed out a breath. “Well, then. Let’s not keep her waiting.”

Pellaeon moved smoothly but slowly. Phennir kept step alongside him and led him into *Vengeance*’s hallways, with the stormtrooper column right behind them.

He'd only gotten a short tour of this vessel after coming aboard, though its entrails were nearly identical to *Megador*'s. Unlike Pellaeon's destroyer, this one had been floating in the vacuum, cold and preserved, for over twenty years. The bulkheads, newly scrubbed-clean by a small army of maintenance droids, had a strange, septic quality about them. Combined with the sparse crew, they felt like the hallways of a half-empty hospital, not a warship equipped with full armaments and sophisticated automated gunnery computers.

Conversationally, Pellaeon said, "So tell me, General, what's your role in this little drama? I can see that Reige and Flennic have both been putting on a show, trying to lure me out here."

"I haven't been part of any drama yet." It took effort to kill the instinct to call him 'sir.' He hadn't always liked Pellaeon, but he'd been Supreme Commander for almost three decades now.

"Is that so?" The old man sounded skeptical.

"Very much. Flennic and Reige decided that they need a public face for their operation, someone everyone in the Empire knows and admires. They also offered me command of this vessel."

"Appealing to your ego all around, aren't they?"

The attack, casually delivered, stung hard. "They appealed to my sense of duty. Rebels had slaughtered three convoys full of Imperial civilians. If you won't stop them, someone has to."

"Even if it means a war, a war we can't possibly win?"

Reige had already explained all that. As soon as they'd stripped off their flight suits, Cyrillian had taken him straight up to the admiral's ready room, where Molgarin Reige had given him a summary of the two-year, top-secret rehabilitation project that had brought *Vengeance* back to life. Reige had also laid out her plans for the future: borders closed and guarded, increased industrial output, and a military buildup that would dispel the image of the crippled

remnant and ward off further violations of Imperial sovereign territory.

"I'm sure the admiral will explain everything once you meet her," Phennir said.

"I'm sure she will."

They arrived at the newly-operable shuttle car that whisk them up the destroyer's long spine to its command section. Phennir went in first, then Pellaeon, then all of the stormtroopers crammed into the car. It was a short but tight and awkward ride that passed without a word spoken, and when it was done, they filed out in reverse order.

Before going further, Pellaeon patted and tugged his white uniform until it was pristine and straight. As Phennir led him forward once again, he said, "Tell me, has this vessel been battle-tested?"

"Not under my command, but I understand the admiral has run drills. Crew might be limited, but the automatic targeting computers are top of the line."

"Yes, Reige always was good with procurement," Pellaeon muttered. He glanced at Phennir and asked, "Do you know where she tested the weapons? What she tested them on?"

Phennir thought a moment. It was something she hadn't mentioned in her little speech. "I'm sure the tests were properly carried out."

Pellaeon surprised him by laughing a dry laugh. "General Phennir, you don't seem to know much about this new monstrosity they've handed you. I did see all those One-Eighty-First TIE Defenders in the back of the hangar. They reeled you in through the old unit, didn't they?"

"My point of contact was General Cyrillian," he admitted.

"Ah, Cyrillian. She came on around the same time as Mynar Devis, didn't she?"

That was a man Phennir hadn't dwelt on for a long time. He'd always been erratic, annoyingly so, unlike the straight and dutiful Cyrillian. "I believe he did."

"And to see you now... Tell me, General, do you think Mister Devis would have approved of this coup attempt?"

"I have no idea," Phennir said. He'd never given it thought. It seemed pointless to, even now. He wondered why Pellaeon cared so much about one pilot seven years dead.

Pellaeon looked down at his boots as he walked- black and freshly polished, of course. So much better than Phennir's scuffed-up ones.

When they reached the door to Reige's ready room, Phennir waved Pellaeon forward and told half his stormtroopers squad to stand guard. Pellaeon waited for them to take positions on either side of the door. Then the old man walked through without hesitation.

After the doors slid shut behind him, Phennir called the other half of the squadron to follow him to the bridge. He walked fast to hide his agitation. Conversations with Pellaeon had always unsettled him in ways he couldn't name, and this was no exception. He was happy to leave him to Reige.

He couldn't hide his anxiety from everyone, though. When he arrived on the bridge, Assyra Cyrillian was there. As he stepped up beside her she examined his face.

"What is it?" Phennir grunted.

"What did Pellaeon say?"

"Does it matter? He's with Reige now. It's no longer up to us."

"Well, *that* is."

She pointed to the forward viewport. *Megador's* long white sword had angled its port side to face their black starboard. Admiral Reige's son was on that ship, and he doubted the man would fire on his own mother. Whether the admiral would fire on her son was another question; he'd always thought of her as a Pellaeon loyalist, smart but timid in critical ways, just like her mentor.

Apparently she'd fooled everyone, from Pellaeon on down.

"Assyra," he said, "Gather your pilots. Take them out and fly cap around *Vengeance*. Don't get too close to *Megador*, just show them you're there."

"Show off the bloodstripes, you mean?"

He nodded. *Megador* had a full fighter complement, potentially enough to tip a pitched battle in its direction, but *Vengeance* was the one with the most famed and honored fighter wing in the galaxy.

"You can count on me, Turr," Cyrillian said, then slipped off the bridge.

Phennir watched her until she was gone. Then, reluctantly, he turned to face *Megador* again. All he could do now, all any of them could do now, was wait.

Molgarin Reige's ready-room was a spartan thing, unsurprising for a vessel just recently returned to fighting shape. It had one broad window that looked out the port side, away from *Megador* and toward the two smaller destroyers. Reige sat him down on an old low-slung reading chair, then took her own place in a seat opposite it. No desk or table blocked the space between them.

She hunched forward, elbows on her knees, and said, "I'm not sure how much Turr Phennir told you on the way here, but everything I told him was accurate."

Pellaeon took a deep breath and rested his hands on the cold, hard arms of the chair. Beneath his uniform, he wore a comlink attached to a small portable transceiver that tight-beamed its audio pickup back to *Megador's* bridge. He kept himself still so as not to rustle his clothing spoke clearly enough to make sure the comlink picked up all his words.

"It seems you brought him in at the last minute."

"Yes, but we've been planning to enlist him for some time."

"You've enlisted the entire One-Eighty-First as well. Impressive."

"That was Kurlen Flennic's idea. He'd developed a good working relationship with their commanding officer."

"You and Flennic. A strange pair." He leaned a little closer, tried to examine her face for signs of the woman he'd once known, trusted, maybe even loved, a long time ago. "Who else in the Moff Council is in on it?"

"Only Flennic," she said. He was surprised to hear that one. He wondered if she was telling the truth. He wondered how honest she'd be. If she was wholly truthful, it probably meant she planned to kill him.

"And how did you recover *Vengeance*?" he asked. "I already know the when and where."

"I wasn't expecting that information to come up. I shouldn't have neglected your friends in the Alliance. The timing was very... inconvenient."

"Did it affect your timetable?"

"Somewhat." Her eyes wavered away from his.

"So what's your grand plan, Molgarin? You wanted me to surrender *Megador* to you, correct? Give you two whole star destroyers to play with? Or is it three? You probably want *Dominion* too."

"I want to strengthen our border and protect the citizens of the Empire. Gilad, you should have never accepted Cal Omas' offer. Your work with the Alliance has made you soft, taken you away from the realities of the Empire."

"You encouraged me to take that job."

"I did, because I thought it might help us tame the rebels. I was wrong. The rebels tamed you, Gil."

"I don't understand." He shook his head. "What *exactly* did I do to turn you away from me, Molgarin?"

"Oh, Gilad, you're so blind. This Alliance, this coalition, is nothing but the New Republic in another form. They're trying to make us into them before we can even notice. They're worse than the Vong. At least those monsters let us know they were trying to conquer us. The Alliance is more insidious. They're trying to take us over without firing a shot."

"We're trying to promote peace and keep the galaxy stable. What you're doing could restart a war."

"*We*," she echoed with a sneer.

"Yes, we. *Me*." He stabbed a thumb at his chest. "That's all I've ever fought for. Peace and stability. You should know that. It doesn't matter who's in charge, what crest they

wear, what they call their government. Peace and stability, that's what's important."

"Gilad, you're talking treason."

"Maybe," he allowed, "But it's what I've believed for seventy years. I've never betrayed that."

She looked down, disappointed. "Then it seems there's no hope for you."

"What do you plan to do with me?" He raised his voice, hoping Vitor could hear it clearly. "Kill me if I don't surrender *Megador*? Fight your own son, maybe kill him?"

She flinched. "I don't want to harm you, or Vitor."

"Then what?"

"Step down, Gilad. Tell Vitor to accept my command. If you do, I promise you can retire wherever you want, however you want, even if it's on Corellia, or in the Alliance somewhere."

"The only homes I've ever really had were spaceships. You know that."

"I'm offering you a chance to live out your last years in peace and dignity. You deserve that."

It was what Bel Iblis had gotten, and so many other rebel luminaries. Not Imperials, though. No, they always got the violent ends. He felt foolish to have hoped for anything else.

Pellaeon tapped his fingertips twice on the hard surface of the chair-arm, signaling Vitor. It would take the captain a few seconds to patch the signal to a new destination, so he took two deep breaths, gathered his thoughts, then leaned forward intently and asked a question he didn't want to hear the answer to.

"Molgarin, who *really* destroyed those convoys?"

Turr Phennir was watching *Megador*'s looming white sword with an almost hypnotic fixation when the comm lieutenant said, "General, we're being hailed by Captain Reige."

Captain, the admiral's son. It took a moment to click. They'd thrown up a jamming field, but at this range, a tight-

beam ship-to-ship transmission would have been able to get through.

“Sir,” the lieutenant continued, “He wishes to speak with you on a private channel.”

“Very well.” Phennir’s hand went to his breast, where a comlink would have been, but he had no link and no uniform. He was captaining a super star destroyer and didn’t even have good boots.

The lieutenant pulled off his headset. “Here, sir.”

Phennir took it and slid it on. He made sure the earpiece was in place and held the tiny microphone close to his mouth. “This is General Phennir.”

“Greetings. This is Captain Vitor Reige.”

“I know who you are.”

“General, I have a transmission you very much need to hear.”

Phennir frowned. The man had to be playing some kind of trick, but he couldn’t imagine what. “From whom?”

“From *you*, in a manner of speaking.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Just one moment-”

There was a click, and then he heard a familiar voice, slightly muffled, saying, “It’s a simple question. I thought you might know the answer.”

“And why would you think that?” said a second voice, female, Admiral Reige.

“Various reasons,” Pellaeon said. “I had an interesting conversation with Cha Niathal right before you went missing.”

Phennir knew he should tear this thing off, buzz the admiral’s ready room, and tell her that her prisoner had a transmitting comlink, but he froze. Something in both their voices compelled his attention.

“And you trust your rebel friends, after all they’ve done?”

“Not in all things. I’m not fool. However, she said that her asset tracking people would identify the Mon Calamari ship

in the recording in a matter of hours. All Mon Cal ships are unique, after all.”

“What does that matter?”

“You said before that you had to adjust your timetable because I was onto this ship. What *else* did you adjust it for?”

“You think I darted off, pretended to be captured, just to keep you from hearing more of Niathal’s lies? I know you’d never believe her. You’re not gullible.”

“I thought you just said I’d been conned by my rebel masters.”

“What are you *getting* at, Gilad?”

“I think you know.”

There was a long pause. Phennir waited, breathless.

When Reige refused to say more, Pellaeon did. “It took you years to get this ship back into fighting shape. Am I supposed to believe that you finally did it, right when some rogue Alliance fleet starts attacking our ships?”

There was another pause. Phennir’s breath held; it seemed to last forever. Eventually Reige said, “You can believe whatever you like.”

He heard a tapping sound, rhythmic, like fingers drumming on a chair-arm: *Rap... rap... rap...*

Pellaeon said, “It’s the most logical explanation. All the other pieces fit. You knew when and where to intercept the convoys. You could wash away all those ships with a big sweep of turbolaser fire. Didn’t you think others would suspect the same thing? One little video can’t fool everyone.”

Rap, rap.... Brrrap...

“Who else knows, Molgarin? Does Phennir?”

The man shuddered at the sound of his name.

“No. And he’s not going to.”

Rap... rap... rap...

“Was it your idea, Molgarin? Killing all those innocent people, was it yours?”

Rap, rap.... Brrrap...

"No," Reige said. Phennir could hear the tension strangling her voice. "That was Flennic's."

"But you're the one who found this ship, aren't you? Flennic's not smart enough."

"I did. He diverted resources to help me fix it. That's why I went to him in the first place. I don't *like* Flennic, Gilad. Once I have secure control over the military I'll get rid of him."

"What did you want to *do* with this ship when you found it?"

"I wanted to... protect the Empire. Restore it."

"There is no Empire. Not anymore. All those rebels, they're the ones who won. We're what they say we are, a Remnant. One little backward corner of space."

Phennir felt his jaw fall slack.

Stiffly, Reige said, "There will always be an Empire if people are willing to die to defend it."

"And if they're willing to slaughter thousands, million, billions? That's the Empire of Palpatine and Tarkin. I didn't fight decades to defend *that*. My son didn't die for it."

"If we keep going down your path, Gilad, then Mynar died for nothing."

That revelation barely registered to Phennir; he was still reeling with shock from the last one.

Rap... rap... rap...

"I trusted you once," Pellaeon said. "You were going to help me change things. Move us into the future."

Rap, rap.... Brrrap...

"Stop that," Reige snapped.

"Stop what?"

"That drumming? What are you doing?"

"Is this the future you want for *your* son, Molgarin?"

"I want him to serve an Empire's that's *strong*, not some remnant."

"You want him to rule as the prince of a pathetic hermit kingdom. That's the kind of life you've decided for Vitor."

"Don't you dare tell me about Vitor. He-"

Phennir didn't hear the rest. Someone grabbed him by the shoulder, spun him around.

"General!" his executive officer half-shouted, "We have incoming!"

Alarms were starting to go off on the bridge. *Megador* sat where she was, off their starboard. The space to their port had filled up with a frenzy of ships.

Over the headset he could hear Reige say, "Gil! What is that?"

"Someone I could trust," the old man said.

At the same time, Phennir's tactical officer said, "General, we're getting reading one star destroyer, three Marauder corvettes, and old *Venator*-class, and—"

"Fierfek!" someone else shouted, "That's a World Devastator!"

It was exactly that. Pulled from hyperspace by the interdicator, it lurched forward, guarded by a motley array of other ships. One broad furnace shone through the open mouth on the forward end of the rectangular monstrosity, twice the size of an *Imperial*-class destroyer.

Phennir hadn't seen one of them since Celanon. After that battle, there's only been one left. He couldn't remember what he'd heard had happened to it, but somehow, incredibly, someone had brought it here.

He'd barely taken it all in when space began to light up with explosions.

Phennir wrenched the headset off. "Tactical, tell the fighters to form up on our forward bow. Comm, is that ship hailing us?"

He looked to the lieutenant, who'd somewhere found a new headset for himself. The young man was so shocked he could barely speak. "Sir... It says it's *Chimaera*, sir, under Admiral Daala. They're requesting our immediate surrender."

The prowlers had been out for almost an hour without reporting anything unusual, and Etahn A'baht was starting

to lose hope. Just by taking *Charnak* to the border was a huge risk; sending the scout ships over the line and into hostile territory put them right on the edge of another war.

He had no actual authority to pull back the prowlers, but he was about make the suggestion to Celchu and L'toth when a call came in from one of the scouts.

All three of them converged on the tactical station while a flustered-looking lieutenant said, "We're getting incoming data from prowler five. Stand by."

"How far away is prowler five?" asked A'baht.

An ensign reported, "She went deepest into Imperial space, sir. Pretty much a straight hours' shot toward Bastion."

A'baht and L'toth both glanced at Celchu. If anyone was going to order them over the line, it was him.

The human asked, "What's our data, Lieutenant?"

"Prowler is reporting signs of a gravitational disturbance. Small but centralized. Deep space, not in any star system."

An interdiction field, they all knew. Nobody had to say it.

"They're also reporting some heat energy discharges, sirs. They can't tell exactly what, not from that range."

"A battle," A'baht said. It was the only possibility.

They looked at Celchu again. He could see the indecision writ on the human's face, the doubt and the turmoil.

Then resolution came to his eyes. Celchu said, "Captain L'toth, tell that prowler to hold position. Pull the others back over the border. And tell helm to plot a course to meet that prowler."

There was a tiny, portent pause. L'toth didn't need to remind Celchu what that meant. He nodded and said, "Right away, sir."

L'toth hurried away. Celchu and A'baht crouched low over the tactical console; they picked up their heads slowly and their eyes met. Grave knowledge passed between two old soldiers, but neither said a word.

When Pellaeon had put in his call to Admiral Daala, telling her to track *Megador's* signal and shadow it no

matter what, he'd had no idea what tricks the old woman might be ready to pull. He was stunned that she'd found that World Devastator; after Celanon, he'd ordered the sole remaining example of the cloned Emperor's monstrosities to be scrapped at Ord Trasi, but the New Republic had retaken the system before the order could be carried out; he'd simply assumed they'd done the work instead.

Seeing that beast was stunning enough, but his attention was immediately grabbed away at the sight of the familiar wedge-shaped battleship now veering down on *Judicator*. It had taken him a minute to recognize that old ship when *Megador* had been wrestled out of hyperspace, but he'd needed only a second to recognize his *Chimaera*. He had no idea how she'd salvaged it after the fall of Bastion, or where she'd found the resources to fix it up, but his heart swelled at the sight of his old ship, his old home. It gave him hope he sorely needed.

Molgarin Reige recognized it too, and it turned her face pale with dread. The woman, now sprung to her feet and staring out the viewport of her readyroom, gaped, "My gods, it's *Chimaera*! Gil, what have you done?"

He rose with slow purpose from his chair. "I've been recording everything you've said and sending it on a tight beam back to *Megador*. Your son rebroadcasted it to my... allies."

"But we have a jamming field!" She sounded more amazed than petulant.

"*Megador* has sophisticated equipment. One more tight-beam transmission, at a specific target, with audio only. We could do it."

Vengeance rocked as the first barrages impacted their ship. Daala's vessels were still tangling with *Judicator* and the drag ship, which meant that *Megador* must have opened fire as well.

Reige's eyes went wide with the realization that her own son was firing on her. She spun back to Pellaeon. "I should kill you now."

"I came prepared for that."

Her right hand went to the sidearm clipped to her belt, but she didn't take it out. With her left, she pulled out her comlink and thumbed it on.

"General Phennir," she snapped, "Report!"

Pellaeon could hear the general's words clearly, even as another impact rattled the ship. "Sir, we're under attack by *Megador* and Admiral Daala."

"Daala?" Reige spat in disbelief. Her eyes darted to Pellaeon; he simply nodded.

"Admiral, *Judicator* is taking heavy fire. She won't last much longer."

"How are our shields holding out?"

"They're holding. Batteries are firing, time-on-target barrages."

Pellaeon could see Reige doing the mental calculations in her head, trying to figure out if this was a battle they could win.

"That *Devastator* is trying to box us in," Phennir said. "Admiral, I don't know if we can flee."

"Break hard port, Phennir. Don't let them trap us."

"Gladly."

"We'll be on the bridge shortly. Reige, out."

She stuffed her comlink back in her pocket and looked back at Pellaeon. "All right. Let's go."

"You're not going to kill me?"

"I should." Her grip tightened on the butt of her pistol without pulling it out. "We might hold yet."

"Not against Daala and Vitor both."

"This could end with *all* of us killed," she snarled. "Imperial slaughtering Imperial. Is that what you wanted?"

"I could ask you the same thing. You've already killed hundreds of loyal citizens, and for what?"

"To make us *strong* again! With *Vengeance* we can be strong! We have three super star destroyers, Gilad! *Three*! It's what we should have had, what we *would* have had, if not for..." Her voice faltered. Her body shook.

"If not for Celanon," he said softly.

"We could have won that fight. We *should* have won that fight. I should have—" she choked again. "

"Oh, Molgarin," he shook his head. "You can't find redemption this way."

"I don't want redemption." She jerked her pistol free of its holster. For a moment he thought she'd shoot him, but she didn't raise it. "I told you what I want. I can still get it."

"No you can't. We didn't lose Celanon because of *you*. We lost it because the Republic was smarter, quicker, more adaptable, and we fought on with the same big monsters, like those were enough. Molgarin, you haven't learned anything. You've just fallen for the same trick twice."

The deck shuddered again. Pellaeon braced himself against the chair to keep from falling over.

"Enough of this," Reige said, voice hard again. "Come on. Let's go."

As the interdictor tried desperately to stay clear of the fighting, *Chimaera* and the old Clone Wars destroyer *Valor* took *Judicator* on either flank, unleashed a torrent of turbolaser fire, and finally popped the ship open in a burst of flame. Neither of them stayed long around their victim; as the Marauder corvettes harassed the interdictor, both old warships pushed ahead and began firing on *Vengeance's* port flank.

The super star destroyer's long body was well-made for broadside attacks, but its narrow black tip wasn't enough to deal with head-on assaults. Even as it fought back Daala and *Megador*, *Vengeance* struggled to bring enough weapons to bear on the World Devastator directly ahead. Its hungry furnace-mouth glowed in space as it edged closer and closer to *Vengeance's* tip, wide and ready to devour as much of the ship as possible.

It was Celanon all over again. After so many years, it was Celanon all over again.

Even as he barked orders to the bridge crew, Turr Phennir's mind whirled, trying to find purchase in the chaos, trying to find something he could do to make it out of here alive. In the frenzy of combat he understood what had happened. His own selfish desires— call it vainglory, call it misguided patriotism— had led him here, to the side of a mad mass-murderer and her desperate attempt to reclaim old glories. Now his own blindness was going to get him killed.

“General,” the comm officer called, “Cyrillian wants to speak with you!”

Phennir affixed the headset to his ear. “Go ahead.”

“It’s getting tight, Turr,” Assyra’s voice crackled. “I’ve sent Red and Blue to tackle *Megador*’s fighter screens. Where should I take Gold and Silver? *Chimaera* or the Devastator?”

“We can handle Daala. Disable that Devastator.”

“Understood.”

They both knew it was damned unlikely, but if someone didn’t stop that monstrosity, *Vengeance* would suffer the same fate as *Reaper*.

“Assyra—” he said, froze. He wanted to ask her what she’d known, if she’d been in on all of Reige’s plot, or if she’d been like him, suckered and conned into complicity with the senseless murder of hundreds of loyal Imperials.

“Just go.” he said.

“Roger. Good luck, Turr.”

The line clicked off. Phennir turned to the tactical holo and watched as two squadrons of TIE Defenders plunged toward the Devastator. It didn’t seem to have a fighter screen of its own, thankfully, but it was still armed and armored enough to take on two star destroyers, to say nothing of two fighter squads.

They had to try something. He could see no other way of getting out of this mess alive. Even if he tried to surrender, the crew might mutiny. Even if they didn’t, he’d have to throw himself at Daala’s feet and plead forgiveness for his own catastrophic stupidity.

And there was no mistaking their attackers' lethal intent. Daala and Vitor Reige had already shown their resolve, they willingness to destroy *Vengeance* and kill Pellaeon, assuming the elder Reige hadn't done so already.

Just as he thought it, the two of them stumbled onto the bridge: the white-haired man and the gray-haired woman, a pistol in the latter's hand. Reige's head spun back and forth as she tried to take in everything on the bridge.

"Admiral Reige," Phennir said as he stalked toward her, "They have us boxed in."

"Can't you break port?"

"We're trying, Admiral, but that Devastator's almost at our nose."

"Intercept it! Smash it!"

He glanced at Pellaeon; the old grand admiral watched the tactical holo with shocking aplomb. "We've just sent have the One-Eighty-First, but I don't know what they can do." He swallowed, dared to say, "Admiral, this isn't a fight we can win."

Reige snarled and looked at Pellaeon. "You've outfought us, Gil. Is that what you want to hear? Is it?"

Pellaeon shook his head sadly. "Surrender, Molgarin, please. End this."

"Surrender to who? You? Daala?"

"To your *son*. Enough people have already died because of you. Don't add any more."

No one else on the bridge understood the weight of those words, but Phennir did. He could see the desperation on Reige's face, but also the hesitation. Even now, she was terrified of killing her own son.

Before he could say anything, the tactical lieutenant reported, "General, the One-Eighty-First is taking heavy fire!"

He blinked, turned away from the two old admirals. "Which squads?"

"Silver and Gold, sir. *Megador* sent a bunch of interceptors to help protect that Devastator."

“Comm!” he barked, “Get me a line with Cyrillian!”

As the comm officer worked, he stalked to the front of the bridge and peered out the viewport. He could see, over ten kilometers away, down at the front end of *Vengeance*’s black spine, the Devastator’s mouth open wide to swallow its tip. He saw bursts of explosions as starfighters clashed, saw the flash and strain of *Vengeance*’s forward shields as the first meters of the ship’s bow dipped into that fiery maw.

“Assyra, are you there?” he called, almost shouting, his voice gone hoarse. “*Assyra*?”

“Heavy fire, Turr-” her voice cut out in static, then came back. “Trying to hold. Turr, we can’t-”

“Pull out!” He shouted. “Run! Get to hyperspace and go!”

“Turr, I-”

There was the scream of static and a burst of more explosions around the Devastator. The comm line went dead.

Frantically, Phennir spun back to the tactical station. “Where’s Gold and Silver squads? Can we track them?”

The lieutenant shook his head. “I’m sorry sir. We’ve got no signal. They’re gone.”

Phennir staggered, almost fell. More death, more attrition, more good pilots, more good *friends*, all gone, and for what?

All for a stupid delusion.

The deck shuddered again as the World Devastator swallowed more of *Vengeance*’s hull. Its body was more narrow than *Reaper*’s, but the Devastator would get a mouthful soon enough, and when it did, it would blow, and it would take the forward half of *Vengeance* with it. Apparently Daala was willing to sacrifice it to take out *Vengeance*.

Phennir came to decision he should have the moment *Chimaera* dropped out of hyperspace. It was too late to save Cyrillian, but at least he could save himself, and whatever scraps of the 181st were left.

“Security!” he called, “Arrest Admiral Reige! Comm! Hail *Megador* and inform Captain Reige we surrender!”

For a moment the entire crew froze in shock. That moment was enough for Reige to swing up her pistol and point it at Phennir's head. The deck shook; she squeezed the trigger but her shot went up to the ceiling.

The shot kicked everything into motion. Four stormtroopers encircled her; a fifth stepped in front of Pellaeon to shield him.

"Put the weapon down!" Phennir barked. They could try stunning her, but Reige was waving her pistol around erratically; her next shot could go anywhere.

She gasped, "You're a traitor. You're all traitors!"

"I'm not the one who slagged our own convoys, killed hundreds of loyal Imperials!"

The woman stared at him, stunned. So did Pellaeon. Apparently the decision to let Phennir listen in on that conversation had been Vitor Reige's move.

Suddenly the deck shook again, even harder than before. Two of the stormtroopers fell; so did Phennir. Another had to lured forward to grab Pellaeon before he pitched to the deck. Reige fired off another shot that whippe over the heads of the deck crew and sparked against the inside of the forward viewport.

Phennir picked up his head and looked ahead as the last Devastator, jammed too full with *Vengeance's* bow, tore itself apart. Its furnace-mouth tore apart and flame seemed to spill out. Explosions raced up the super star destroyer's hull, shredding black armor and casting it into space. Crewmen frantically reported that the shields were down, half the weapon batteries down, and *Megador* and *Chimaera* were still firing. The deck shook and lights flickered.

"Tell them we surrender!" Phennir shouted as he lurched to his feet. "Do it! Do it now!"

This time the screw didn't hesitate to comply. He spun around, back toward Reige and Pellaeon. The old woman still had the pistol; she was clutching it to her breast with both hands. Two standing stormtroopers had their rifles leveled at her but didn't fire.

"It's over," Phennir rasped. "Put down the gun."

Reige shook her head wildly. "No. No, you don't understand, I can't fail again--"

"It's over," Pellaeon repeated. "Molgarin, please. Just drop the gun and you can see your son again."

"Oh, *Vitor*," she gasped. "Vitor..."

There was the harsh sound of a blaster-shot, slightly muffled; the whiff of burning and ozone. Then Reige crumpled to the deck. Her blaster clattered to the floor. Thin trails of dark smoke rose from the center of her chest.

The bridge went silent. Pellaeon stared in slack-jawed shock; without the stormtrooper to brace him he would have fallen.

Then the comm officer said, "Sir, Captain Reige has accepted our surrender."

Salvation took a moment to process. "And Daala?"

"He says Daala will comply."

The ship still shuddered in death throes; the lights still flickered. He turned and looked out the viewport. The bow still smoldered, but no more laserfire lit up the space between *Vengeance* and the vessels surrounding it.

He should have felt relieved. He should have felt *something*. Instead he felt hollow, empty, like a walking ghost. He turned back to Molgarin Reige's body, sprawled face-up. She wore a shocked expression, even in death.

Phennir shifted, looked at Pellaeon. The old man sagged in the arms of the anonymous stormtrooper. One thin tear-trail glistened as it ran down his old and battered cheek.

Charnak was carefully when it dropped out of hyperspace. The small prowler hung back far enough away from the battle site to avoid detection by all but the most active long-range scanners, and the larger cruiser in turn dropped out just far enough away from the prowler to receive a detailed life feed of its sensor data.

It was immediately clear that the battle was already over.

“Pellaeon must have won,” L’toth said as the three senior officers huddled around the tactical console. “It’s the only explanation. That ship’s been halfway destroyed.”

“Can you be sure of that?” A’baht grunted. “All we know is that *Vengeance* was wrecked.”

“And *Megador* is still in one piece.”

“There’s also more debris.” Celchu’s silver eyebrows drew together in concentration. “Looks like an *Imperial*-class destroyer. And something else.”

“Can’t tell what they one is yet,” L’toth said.

Celchu glanced at A’baht. “What happened to *Vengeance*, the whole forward half torn up, doesn’t that remind you of something?”

It most certainly did, but A’baht couldn’t countenance it. World Devastators hadn’t seen action in over twenty years. It had been assumed they were all destroyed.

Of course, everyone had assumed *Vengeance* was gone too, and *Megador* at one time. It was chilling to wonder what other awful legacies of Palpatine might still be lying around, over thirty years after his death.

“There’s something new coming in.” L’toth said. More data appeared on the feed. L’toth drew in breath.

“A World Devastator,” Celchu muttered. “Amazing.”

“It can’t be,” A’baht shook his head.

“They’ve ID’d one of the repulsor-engines.” L’toth tapped the screen. “Those things are hard to mistake. What else could it be?”

Celchu glanced at A’baht. “Looks like you taught someone a new trick, didn’t you?”

Apparently he had. A’baht didn’t know how to feel about that. His mind flashed back, not to Celanon, but to those war games in the Anaxes System, barely more than a week ago. Pellaeon had sent him personal thanks after that, which he’d thought unusual but nothing more, but as he looked at the prowler’s sensor feed he realized that Pellaeon’s surprise pincer movement against *Guardian* had recalled something of his own against *Reaper*.

The destruction of *Vengeance*, here in this lonely corner of space, had replicated *Reaper*'s death in a more accurate, and more violent, way.

In a way, it was all rather humbling.

"Pellaeon learns from his mistakes," A'baht said. "That's what makes him different from all the other Imperials."

"But who was on *Vengeance*?" L'toth asked. "Someone important must have found that ship, fixed it up, coordinated all those convoy attacks."

Celchu and A'baht exchanged looks. The human said, "I don't want to risk getting closer and I definitely don't want to try hailing them, not when they've got everything well in hand. We'll have to wait for the formal Imperial statement on all of this."

"What could they possibly say to explain everything?" A'baht asked.

"I have no idea." Celchu shook his head. "They're still Imperial, though, so I'm sure we won't get the whole truth."

A'baht wanted to know everything that had happened there, but he knew he never would. "It will be hard, walking back from everything that's happened in the past few days."

"Pellaeon believes in the Alliance," Celchu said firmly. "He'll make it work."

A'baht couldn't argue with the surety in the human's eyes. He was surprised to find an echo of it in himself. The old Dornean had never been part of the Rebel Alliance, and had joined and left the New Republic, and the Galactic Alliance after it, on his own timing and his own terms. He'd never thought himself as committed to the idea of one sprawling galactic union as men like Celchu and Pellaeon, but as he looked at the sensor feed from the prowler, at the awful destruction brought by and upon a secret clan of die-hard Imperials, he found himself wishing them, and their Galactic Alliance, a long and stable future. It was probably the only way to keep such a futile debacle from happening again, on an even larger scale.

"Such a waste," L'toth muttered.

The two old generals nodded, understanding the captains' words better than he did himself.

L'toth looked at them both. "Well? What do we do now?"

"I want to get well clear of this place," Celchu said. "Have helm plot us a course back to Alliance space."

"And the prowler?"

Celchu considered. "We should keep it here for now. There's no telling what else we might pick up. Tell them to hold their position until further notice."

"Gladly, sir."

As L'toth moved off to relay orders, Celchu and A'baht stared at one another, faces underlit by the glow of the tactical display.

"Thank you for coming along on this crazy mission, General," Celchu said. "I know it wasn't what you wanted or planned on."

"You didn't either. You've nothing to apologize for."

"Still, I'm sorry if you feel like you keep on getting roped into somebody else's problem." Celchu tried a light smile.

A'baht thought on the Empire, the Yevetha, the Yuuzhan Vong; on Dornea, Celanon and Orinda, Bavinyar, N'zoth, Rathalay, Gyndine, this lonely track of space.

Grimly, he said, "It seems to be our calling."

Celchu nodded. On that, at least, they understood each other. He suspected Pellaeon did too. They were all old men.

It took hours to evacuate surviving personnel off *Vengeance*. It would take weeks more to scrap what was left of the old warship. Few of its crew put up resistance as they were shuttled to *Megador*'s hangar bay and kept under armed guard. Despite the stress and awful loss of the past few hours, Vitor Reige did an admirable job coordinating the retrieval and lockdown of all those thousands of people.

Once that task was done, he flew to *Chimaera* to speak with Natasi Daala and Gilad Pellaeon.

It was not the homecoming Pellaeon had wanted or even expected, but he did find some solace on being aboard

Chimaera again. Its tight, familiar halls bespoke of an intimacy he'd never gotten from massive vessels like *Reaper* or *Megador*. Unlike those ships, as devoted to Imperial vainglory as they were to actual peacekeeping, there was a heart to this ship, a heart that beat with his own.

Still, *Chimaera*'s familiar captain's quarters did little to soothe the hurt inside him now.

"You shouldn't feel ashamed of it, Gil," Daala said as she carried two tumblers of Johrian brandy and placed them on the low table between them. "I never suspected her either."

"You were monitoring the whole thing, were you?" Pellaeon took the tumbler between two hands, felt its cool smooth glass beneath his palms, but didn't drink.

"I listened to your dialogue on *Vengeance*, if that's what you mean."

"I mean, the convoy attacks, all of it. Were you following all of *that*?"

"Yes, but like I just said, I had no idea that Reige was behind it. She always seemed more... reasonable than that."

"I thought she was. I thought the two of us could change the Empire, together." He tipped back the tumbler and took his first drink. He savored the burn in his throat.

"You trusted her for a long time, didn't you?"

"It was more than trust," Pellaeon allowed, but said nothing more. He'd never told Daala about Mynar, and he certainly had never told her about his brief, long-ago passion with a young female captain desperate to prove herself.

"She was always one to blame herself," Pellaeon muttered. He looked down into his glass, tilted it, watched light slide across the brandy's amber surface. "She thought what happened to *Reaper* was her fault, you know. She carried it for all those years."

"Our little maneuver must have brought back the worst memories," Daala said, not without pride.

"I should have realized it. Should have seen it, done something."

She leaned forward. "Reige made her own choices, Gilad. If they were bad ones the fault is hers, not yours."

He sighed and took another drink. He swallowed and said, "An admiral is responsible for the actions of every man and woman under his command."

"Reige was an admiral too. Her actions, her choice, her fault." Daala said firmly. She stared at him for a moment, hard, then sighed and took a drink from her glass. "You've always tried to take too much on yourself, too."

Pellaeon took another drink. He swallowed and looked down into his glass: one mouthful left. He was already getting lightheaded. Back when he was younger, he could have downed half a bottle of the stuff and still reported for reveille and morning exercises the next day.

"It's good to see you, Natasi," he said. "Good to know there's a few left I *can* trust."

"Likewise, Gil." Daala lifted her glass in a silent toast.

There was a buzzing at the door. Pellaeon placed his glass on the table, tugged his uniform straight, and said, "Enter."

As expected, it was Vitor Reige who came through the door. Pellaeon had barely talked to the young man since his mother's death. He wore an officer's stoic mask as he took in the two old admirals seated across from each other.

"Thank you for joining us, Captain," Daala said. "I'll get you a drink."

To Pellaeon's surprise, Vitor didn't object. He dropped into the third seat at the table and took the glass of brandy from Daala. She poured a little more into Pellaeon's glass and returned to her chair.

"Well Captain," she said, "What have you to report?"

"All crew from *Vengeance* have been contained on *Megador*," he said. "There's only a skeleton crew, our people, holding the ship together now."

"We'll have to scrap it," Pellaeon said. "And good riddance."

A smile played on Daala's lips. "Such a waste, fixing up a pretty ship like that, only for it be destroyed so soon."

“Ah, you’ve always liked your star destroyers black, my Darakaer.”

“There was something else, sir,” Reige said.

“Go on.”

“I didn’t notice this during the battle, sir, but *Megador*’s sensor techs reported it afterward. They picked up what they believe to be a spacecraft of some kind on the far edge of our sensor zone.”

Daala frowned. “Was someone watching the battle?”

“Perhaps. It seems to have shown up right when the fight started and left maybe an hour later.”

“Can we tell what kind?”

“It was too far away. I’m sorry.”

Daala glanced at Pellaeon. “What do you think Gilad? Whose was it?”

“The possibilities are endless,” he muttered. It could have been more of Molgarin’s people, shadowing the real fight, but somehow he doubted it. Flennic’s, perhaps, but he’d trusted Ardifff to make sure all the Moff’s property was impounded and painstakingly examined. If it didn’t turn out to be Flennic, it could have been a watcher from the Alliance who’d crept over the border after picking up the flare of battle.

Surprisingly, that possibility worried him the least.

“We can figure that out later,” Pellaeon said. “For now, Vitor, congratulations on a job well done. Please, have a drink.”

Reige took a sip of brandy and coughed into his hand.

“My, my,” Daala said, “Gilad, haven’t you taught this young man to drink?”

“My capacity isn’t what it was,” Pellaeon said. “Captain, what about Yaga Minor?”

“I did as you said, sir. I transmitted the complete recording from *Vengeance* over to *Dominion*. Captain Ardifff just reported back. Kurlen Flennic has been placed under arrest.”

“Excellent, Pellaeon nodded. “I look forward to his trial.”

“What kind of trial?” Daala raised an eyebrow.

“Something succinct and well-choreographed, that makes sure everyone knows whose idea it was to start destroying our own convoys.”

“Execution?” Reige asked.

“Quite likely.”

“Didn’t he try to shoot you once?” Daala asked. “You should have had him spaced right there.”

He should have, but at the time it had seemed like a necessary mercy to keep the Moff Council on his side. If he *had* killed Flennic at that time, then it was possible *Vengeance* would never have been recovered, and that Molgarin Reige would never have thrown herself away on some last desperate attempt to revive dead glories.

He couldn’t let his thoughts stray down that path. It would ruin him. He took another sip of brandy and savored more burn.

“What about Phennir?” Reige asked. “We have him locked in solitary right now.”

“I’ll have to consider Phennir,” Pellaeon muttered. He’d barely thought of that man at all.

Cautiously, Reige asked, “Will Moff Flennic be set to take the entire blame, sir?”

Pellaeon sighed, took another drink. His head was swimming a little now, maybe too much. He looked at Daala and said, “Natasi, can you please excuse us?”

“Of course.” She rose to her feet. “I’m sure I can busy myself on the bridge.”

“Thank you.”

After she slipped out the door, Pellaeon forced himself to focus his attention on young Reige. He stared at that face, shaped in many ways like his mother’s. He wondered whether, if he searched long enough, he could find his own features there. They’d been more obvious on Mynar, because mother and father had been so different in appearance, but on Reige, it was harder to tell.

Curiosity passed quickly. He discovered that, more than ever, he didn’t want to know. Mynar and Hallena were both

long gone; now Molgarin joined them. He didn't want to know. He didn't want to let Reige deeper into his heart, knowing how much pain he'd already caused the man.

At last he asked, "Did you link Turr Phennir to my conversation with your mother?"

Reige blinked; it clearly wasn't what he'd been expecting. He said, "Yes, sir. I did. I'm sorry for not asking you. It just came to me, when I started patching in the transmission to Daala."

"You don't have to apologize for anything. It might have saved my life. I know it saved a lot of other ones."

Reige shifted in his chair. "Sir, what will you say about my mother?"

It was a decision Pellaeon didn't have to think about. He'd decided it on *Vengeance's* bridge, as he stared down at the smoking self-inflicted hole in her chest.

"We'll say that she died in service of the Empire. And we'll remember her as such."

"Then you mean-"

"Flennic can take the blame for everything. We'll arrange the trial that way. There are, in the end, advantages to being a despot. As for your mother, I want to give her a hero's funeral."

Reige considered that. "I'm glad, sir. But after what my mother did..."

"Does she deserve it?"

Reige nodded.

Pellaeon sighed. His brandy tempted him, so he placed the glass down on the table and held Vitor's eye. "No. She doesn't. But we'll give it to her anyway, because of all she's given us. Your mother devoted her life to the Empire's service. She gave too much, I think. She tried too hard. And she couldn't allow herself to change."

"I know, sir." For the first time, Reige's voice trembled. He blinked wetness from his eyes and said, "I want you to know, sir, that I had nothing to do with my mother's actions. I had no idea that-"

Pellaeon held up a hand. "I know, Vitor. Believe me, I know."

Reige looked down at his lap. "I should have been able to do something."

"I know," Pellaeon said. It was a burden they'd have to keep carrying, the two of them, until their days were done. It was an awful thing to share, but a small part of him felt glad to be able to share it with someone.

After a long silence, Reige picked up his head and asked, "Where do we go now?"

"Forward," Pellaeon said. "Where we should have been going, all this time."

Turr Phennir had no idea how long he'd been sitting in his cell when Pellaeon finally came. He'd made no effort to keep track of time; he felt lost in an empty nothing, without past or future, too tired even to regret the stupid path that had brought him here.

When Pellaeon stepped into his cell, he merely stared down at the man sitting on his bunk. Phennir stared up and didn't rise.

Eventually Pellaeon said, "I suppose I should thank you."

Phennir didn't say a thing. Pellaeon had a history of unwarranted acts of mercy. He wasn't sure if he wanted or deserved one.

"Admiral Reige assured me you were brought into this mess at the last minute," Pellaeon continued. "But then, I understand you heard all of that."

"I had no idea what she'd been doing." His voice scraped in his throat.

Pellaeon nodded. "I see no reason to disbelieve you. Nonetheless, even if you didn't know about the convoy attacks, you willingly took part in an attempt to overthrow the legitimate government of the Galactic Empire."

Phennir didn't deny it. He stared up, waiting for his sentence.

“At the same time,” Pellaeon went on, “You *did* agree to surrender *Vengeance*. And you did attempt to restrain Admiral Molgarin when you realized the extent of her crimes.”

“I wish I’d succeeded.”

“Believe me,” Pellaeon said, “So do I.”

Phennir could hear the grief in his voice. Reige had long been a Pellaeon loyalist, apparently a personal friend. Her betrayal and death must have hurt the old man very deeply.

As he stared up at the face, all the decades of hurt etched in its lines, Phennir recalled a snippet of conversation between him and Reige. He recalled the mention of a son, Mynar.

It wasn’t the rarest name, but as he looked at Pellaeon now, he remembered the admiral’s inquiries into Mynar Devis, the small requests, the word passed down that the admiral had taken an unaccountable shine to the brash pilot.

Of course, Mynar, too, was dead.

As he stared up at that face, Phennir thought he understood just a tiny bit more of the pain so many decades of warfare had wrought on the admiral. He’d never understand it all, but he did understand a little more.

“I’m sorry, sir,” he rasped. “For everything.”

“Reige made her own choices,” Pellaeon said.

He didn’t understand Phennir, just like Phennir didn’t really understand him, but it had always been that way. It was part of the reason Phennir had never truly felt at home in Pellaeon’s Imperial Remnant, but only a part.

“How many from the One-Eighty-First survived?” he asked.

“Overall? Fifteen pilots.”

Phennir’s chest tightened. Fifteen pilots out of four dozen. It was a sickening, awful end to the career of such an illustrious unit.

“What will happen to the remaining pilots?” he asked.

“I’m not certain yet. The complicity of individual members of *Vengeance*’s crew will be determined over time. If absolved, they’ll be reassigned.”

“So this is the end of the One-Eighty-First.”

“For now, perhaps. Maybe another unit will deserve its name, someday.”

“But not now.” Phennir felt as though he’d been robbed of everything, his legacy and past both. He never thought he’d lived to see the day when the 181st dissolved. Even though its involvement in Reige’s coup attempt had been Assyra Cyrillian’s doing, he couldn’t help but feel responsible.

“Kurlen Flennic has been placed under arrest,” Pellaeon said. “He will be tried and executed for his role in all this.”

Now they came to it, finally. “And me, sir?”

Pellaeon stared down at him, like he hadn’t really made up his mind yet. Finally, the old man said, “For everything you’ve done, good and bad, I think you deserve... a reprieve.”

Phennir blinked “What does that *mean*?”

“You will not be tried and punished. However, I will make certain that all the glamors and privileges of your past rank are revoked. No more ceremonies, no more honor guards, nothing.”

Laughter rattled Phennir’s chest. “Do you think I care about those things? That I’ll miss them?”

Pellaeon tilted his head slightly, as though he was curious to know what Phennir cared about in the end.

Phennir sighed. “What I cared about is already gone. It’s not coming back. I thought it might, when I saw *Vengeance* sitting in space, but I was wrong. I was wrong and you were right this whole time.”

Pellaeon didn’t look satisfied. “What will you do?”

He sighed again and looked down at his hands. “I don’t think I belong in the Empire anymore. I might have to look somewhere else.”

“Such as?”

“I have no idea,” Phennir said. He laughed despite himself. After all this time, after everything he’d done, he felt free, maybe for the first time in his life. It was a dizzying, awful, empty feeling.

He picked up his head and looked up at the admiral. "Maybe I'll wander for a spell. See what else is out there. I knew a man once. He did the same thing. I think it worked out for him in the end."

Pellaeon nodded. Maybe he understood the reference to Baron Fel, maybe he didn't. For Phennir's part, he finally felt a bit closer to understanding the man he'd admired and trusted so long ago.

If he'd gained nothing else from all of this, well, at least he had that.

The funeral for Molgarin Reige was held on Bastion, one week after the battle between *Megador* and *Vengeance*. By that time, Imperial news networks had firmly set down their version of the story, one which the Alliance did not find cause to argue.

According to the official line, Moff Kurlen Flennic had orchestrated the convoy attacks in hopes of resparking hostiles between the Alliance the Empire. Flennic had been famously hawkish, and the assertion was very believable. When his execution had been announced, few argued. Those other moffs on the Council, eager to fill the power vacuum he left behind, were happiest to see him go.

It had also been announced that Molgarin Reige had been killed in service of the Empire. The exact circumstances were never explicitly stated, but it was stated that she'd be given a hero's funeral on the Imperial capital.

Dignitaries from other galactic governments were invited, and so they came. Tycho Celchu was among them. He arrived at Bastion as the highest-ranking member of the Alliance military. A few other foreign representatives were also present, including Admiral Baas from Hapes and Denjax Teppler from Corellia, but all in all, Reige's funeral was a much more sparse and somber thing than that of Garm Bel Iblis.

Tycho thought it was appropriate. Reige had, after all, been an Imperial through and through; a Pellaeon loyalist, but

still an Imperial, and she'd never shown much eagerness to cooperate with other governments in the Alliance's still-awkward coalition.

The ceremony was held in a convocation hall draped in black-and-white Imperial banners. Soldiers in dress uniform crowded the bleachers rising on either side of the main floor. A brass band and drum corps played a fitting dirge as they marched in with a closer black casket and carried it to the front podium. The pomp and splendor, funereal as it was, made Tycho recall his time at the Imperial Naval Academy, a long lifetime ago. It seemed unchanged in all that time.

Grand Admiral Pellaeon gave the speech, of course. Off to one side, Tycho noticed a young man with captain's bars on his chest. He recognized the face from his latest intelligence briefing. It belonged to Vitor Reige, captain of *Megador* and son of the deceased.

"I had the privilege of knowing Molgarin Reige for over thirty years," Pellaeon said. "She was joined the crew of *Chimaera* three months before the Battle of Endor. Young, capable female officers were a rarity then, moreso than now, but I could tell from the first time I saw her that she had the drive to succeed. I admired that very much about her. I knew she had what it takes to serve the Empire.

"She was at Endor and saw what we lost that day. She was witness to many other battles in our long war to survive. She was at Bilbringi, and Byss, and she was at Celanon, which I think weighed on her most of all."

Pellaeon paused, looked down at his podium. He seemed to waver, but he picked his head up and said, "Time and again, the Empire has been plagued by those who claim to be the next great leader who will restore our rightful glory. As I'm sure you know, so many of those men have been false prophets, driven only by their own egos. Kurlen Flennic was only the most recent in that dishonorable line.

"That the Empire still remains today after all their efforts of her own to despoil it is, I believe, the ultimate testament

to the endurance of the Imperial ideal of peace and security for all.

“Molgarin Reige was different from those men. She was a servant. She was a patriot. She was a friend. And I...” His voice wavered again. “I will miss her very much. Thank you.”

Pellaeon stepped down. There was a short pause, where all the assembled officers looked between each other as if to ask *is that it?* Then Vitor Reige started clapping, and everyone else fell in to join him. Pellaeon took his seat next to Reige and didn’t clap. He didn’t say a word. Tycho stared at his face from his spot in the stands far away, but he couldn’t read a thing.

After the ceremony, the coffin was loaded into a speeder that led the processional to the Imperial military cemetery on the outskirts of the capital. Green hills rolled forever under the sun. Simple white-stone pillars, each one a meter high, stuck out of the ground at half-meter intervals. There must have been millions of them.

The sight staggered Tycho. He’d seen even bigger military cemeteries in Alliance space, but he’d never once been to an Imperial one. He couldn’t help but wonder how many of these men he’d fought, how many he’d personally killed.

The funeral crowd, far smaller than what had been at the convocation hall, followed the speeder to an open grave. Pellaeon and Reige stood at its head while the soldiers took out the coffin and placed it in the ground. The admiral and the captain each dropped handfuls of soil into the pit. And that was that.

A queue formed in front of Reige and Pellaeon, mostly Imperial officers giving brief condolences. Tycho lingered until the line reached full length, then inserted himself at the very end.

He waited patiently as he shuffled along. By the time he reached the grave, Reige had stepped away. Pellaeon was still there, though, and his tired eyes lit up in recognition when he saw Tycho.

"I heard you were coming," the admiral said as he clasped Tycho's hands between his own. "Thank you. I can't tell you how much I appreciate that."

"I just wanted to give your friend the respect she deserved."

"Yes, of course." Pellaeon's smile wavered.

Lowering his voice, Tycho said, "I also hope I was able to be helpful to you, in the end."

He didn't doubt Pellaeon took his meaning, but the old admiral stared at his face, examining it, for almost half a minute before replying, "You were most helpful, General Celchu. I'm in your debt."

"I think you already paid it by putting a stop to things before they got out of control."

He wondered if he'd given too much away. Every sensor log from *Charnak* and her prowlers had been shared with Niathal and Kalenda, but the information was still highly classified; not even Pellaeon should have been able to see it.

Of course, he could have known some other way.

But in the end, Pellaeon didn't ask questions. He gave Tycho's hands another squeeze and said, "We should call it even and forget everything."

"That sounds good to me, Admiral." Tycho looked down at the grave. "I'm sure you've heard this a lot today, but I am sorry about Admiral Reige. I know she was one of your best."

"Thank you." Pellaeon put on a smile.

"I know it must be hard, for a man in your position, to find someone who's as loyal as she was."

"There's no replacing her." Pellaeon's voice cracked. He looked away.

"I'm sure there isn't." Tycho withdrew his hands, let them fall to his side. "When you get back to the Core, sir, I'll be waiting."

"Thank you, General. Your trust means... more than you can ever know."

Tycho smiled, bowed his head slightly, and started walking. He got close to the speeder he'd rode in on, now filling up with mourners ready to be taken back to the city.

Tycho turned for one last look at the plot and the mourners. He lingered for a moment, watching Pellaeon's white back and white head as the old man stood sentinel over the grave.

Then he turned and walked away.

Read on for a preview of
Star Wars: Destinies
By Gregory O. Scott

When the sun went down on Galactic City, everything changed. First shadows fell from the sides of skyscrapers and flooded the lower levels with darkness even when the sky still glowed. As the lower levels fell into darkness their lights turned on even while the sky was still bright high overhead. Lamp-glow climbed up from the lower levels floor-by-floor while the sun dipped below the horizon so that when the last light left the tips of the high skyscrapers the lower and middle storeys of the same buildings were plunged already deep into night.

By the time the tops of the highest buildings turned on their lights, the nightlife in the lower levels was already going strong. They said there were parts of Galactic City where the party went on for twenty standard hours of the day, and the only break came in the four midday hours when the sun shone straight through the artificial canyons and bleached the pleasure district dry.

One of those twenty-hour places was the Mynock's Roost. It occupied three storeys and had broad balconies that jutted out into one of those duracrete canyons, making it a popular spot for a variety of beings looking for a long enjoyable night. It was too deep into the lower levels to give a good view of the skyscraper peaks, but

you could still watch the speeders cut through the narrow lanes and admire the flashing multi-color lights of the establishments that lined the so-called Windlash Alley.

Ben Skywalker was pretty sure he was the only twelve-year-old in the Mynock's Roost that evening, or at least the only twelve-year-old human. He loved that fact because it made him feel mature, but it also made him feel conspicuous. Being conspicuous was one of the things he hated (and it was tragically hard to avoid when you were the son of the most famous being in the whole galaxy) but that was why he was huddled in the shadowy back corner of the booth with a hood pulled over his head.

Jacen Solo wasn't huddled in the shadows and he didn't wear a hood. He was dressed in simple black trouser-and-vest combination and he was chatting pleasantly with the Twi'lek waitress. When the order was finished, the waitress sauntered off to another table. Ben couldn't help but admire the rich green tone of her skin, and the waitress outfits here certainly left skin to admire.

"Something on your mind, Ben?" Jacen asked.

Ben jerked his attention to his cousin. "No. Not at all."

Jacen chuckled softly. "Keep your eye on the prize, Ben. A Jedi can't let himself get distracted by anything."

"I wasn't distracted."

Jacen raised an eyebrow.

Ben sighed and crossed his arms over his chest. It wasn't his fault that Jacen dragged him to a place like this. Of course, Jacen wasn't distracted at all. Jacen *never* seemed to look at girls, which Ben found strange but also comforting, because it was proof that eventually his hormones would stop tugging him in the direction of any extra skin, green or otherwise.

"What did you get me to drink?" Ben asked.

"Churban brandy and a shot of Rycanthian whiskey," Jacen deadpanned.

"Seriously."

"The house soda."

"Okay. I can handle that."

Jacen leaned back in his seat. "I'm surprised you look so relieved. I thought you enjoy coming to places like this. Most kids your age don't, not even the other Jedi trainees."

Ben knew that was true. Most of the other Jedi apprentices were stuck in the Temple, doing boring things like practicing levitation all day and sleeping in the dorms all night. It was thanks to Jacen that he was out here, seeing the undersides of the galaxy and learning how to put his growing Force skills to practical use.

"Tell me about our target," Ben said.

"I already did. Paks Veem from Malastare, informant extraordinaire. Alliance Intelligence said he's dared stop by Coruscant for a one-night business meeting, and apparently this is his favorite spot in Galactic City. Paks Veem is no ordinary low-level gun-and-drug runner. He sells *information* on guns and drugs, usually stuff stored in secure warehouses in the far corners of the galaxy, which is a lot more valuable."

Ben got that part, but Jacen had pulled him away from dinner with his parents last-minute. Luke and Mara had minded the interruption a lot more than their son, and he didn't look forward to facing them later tonight.

"Why aren't Kalenda's people trying to find him?"

"They are," Jacen tapped the tiny audio transmitter tucked in his ear. Jacen's hair was long enough to hide it unless he tilted his head back. "They'll tell us if he comes our way."

"But why are *we* here?"

"Because Kalenda's people don't have the Force, and our target does."

Ben raised an eyebrow. "You're saying this Paks Veem trained at the Jedi Academy?"

"He was there briefly around the same time I was. I didn't know him well at all, but I understand he was hard to teach. Very ill-behaved. He didn't seem to have much technical skill either, aside from an ability to sense other

people's surface thoughts and emotions, which I guess helps if you're making your career as a crook."

"So he's gone to the Dark Side or something?"

"Well, the Dark Side is a slippery concept." Jacen looked like he wanted to say more but didn't want to say anything that would get him in trouble with Ben's father. "From what we've heard, he's no Sith, or anything close. Sith want power to control and dominate things. Paks Veem just wants a quick credit."

"Or a million credits."

"Exactly."

The Twi'lek waitress showed up with a tray hoisted on her shoulder. Ben tried not to stare as she leaned forward and handed him his soda.

Instead of watching her go, he very deliberately looked at Jacen and asked, "So that's the key to not turning Sith? To have low standards?"

Jacen chuckled and sipped his own drink. It was dark and bubbly and whatever it was, it looked like something Ben was way too young for.

Jacen put his glass down and leaned closer to Ben. "There's a definite loftiness to being a Sith that you don't find in low-lives like Paks Veem. People like our grandfather or Emperor Palpatine were big thinkers. They wanted to totally remake the galaxy and the Force was their only way to achieve that kind of ambitious end."

Ben made a face. "You could say that of the Vong, or a million other nasties."

"You could say that about your father too," Jacen said. "The desire for control isn't *inherently* bad. It depends on what you're trying to control, and for what purpose."

"So what, intent determines the rightness of your actions?"

Jacen got another I-hope-you-don't-tell-your-father-about-this look, but before he could say more his hand shot up and pressed his earpiece.

Time to act inconspicuous. Ben took another sip of his drink and scanned the inside of the Roost. The interior

lights were dim, but he could still make out a host of humans and other aliens, from Arkanaians to Zehethbra, scantily-clad servers of various races, even a cluster of Trandoshans in an opposite corner booth. He couldn't spot a single three-eyed Gran, though.

Jacen took his hand away from his ear and drank a big gulp. In a low, casual voice he said, "Target's heading this way."

"I don't see him," Ben said. He kept his face pointed toward his cousin but swung his eyes left and right, just like Jacen had taught him.

Jacen didn't respond. They'd picked this booth so that, combined, they could have a full-range view of the bar. Jacen's eyes flicked back and forth as he took another gulp of his drink. Ben saw the light of recognition in them but didn't turn to seek their target.

Keeping the cup close to his mouth, Jacen asked, "Do you have it?"

Ben reached into the pocket of his robe. He drew the small flat disc he'd been keeping there and placed it on the seat next to him. "It's out."

Jacen kept looking over Ben's shoulder. Ben felt nothing in the Force as the audio recorder jumped into the air and flew high, all the way up to the dark and smoky ceiling.

"He's moving to the booth next to the Trandoshans," Jacen muttered.

"Do you have the recorder?"

Jacen nodded slightly and took another gulp from his drink. Ben was amazed that his cousin could watch the target, stealthily fly an eavesdropping device around a crowded cantina, *and* enjoy an alcoholic beverage at the same time without the slightest strain.

Then Jacen leaned back in the booth and tapped the device at his ear. Ben patiently sipped from his drink and risked a sidelong glance at the booth. Sure enough, in the booth next to the Trandoshans was a Gran. Sitting across from the Gran, leaning forward for conversation, was a

thin humanoid with pale blue skin and feathery white hair.

“Omwati?” Ben mouthed.

Jacen nodded and took another casual sip from his drink. He didn't have to tell Ben that he'd slipped the eavesdropping device onto the ceiling over their booth and was listening in to their conversation. Ben was mostly curious as to what an Omwati was doing talking to Paks Veem. Omwati rarely left their home planet, and they had a reputation as a scientific, peaceful race.

Ben didn't ask Jacen to explain what was going on, though he was dying to know. He didn't want to come across as an impatient child. Instead he finished off his soda and leaned back in the shadows of the booth. From the corner of his eye he could see the Omwati and Paks Veem engaging in some animated conversation.

Suddenly the Twi'lek waitress appeared in front of them and asked if they'd like refills for their drinks. Ben nearly shot upright in shock and even Jacen looked a little surprised.

It took Jacen only a moment to compose himself. He smiled politely and said, “I'm fine, thank you.”

“Yeah,” Ben grunted, “Me too.”

The waitress smiled back and went off to another table. When she was out of the way Ben immediately looked at Paks Veem's booth. The two aliens had stopped talking. Veem's long snout was up in the air and his three eyes were scanning the bar. The Omwati just looked confused.

“Did he feel us in-”

“Quiet,” Jacen snapped, and suddenly his presence in the Force winked to nothing. Ben knew he could do that, but it was always disconcerting when he did. Right now he wished he could do the same. He already felt ashamed at letting the waitress surprise him like that, even more for letting that shock register in the Force. The best he could do was sink into the booth's shadow and hope was wasn't noticed.

Jacen's disappearing-act seemed to alert the Gran even more. He said something to the Omwati, who moved to

protest, then got to his feet. The Omwati reluctantly stood up too, and both began moving for the exit. Thankfully, Jacen and Ben were closer to the door and had a chance to cut them off or track them, but only if they were fast about it.

“Sithspawn,” Jacen said, “They’re changing location.”

“Can we still track them?”

“It’s about to get a lot harder.” Jacen stood up. “Come on, with me.”

Ben scooted to the edge of the booth and jumped out onto the bar floor-

-right in the path of a Zeltron waitress. She was spun off her feet and her cups sprayed glass and foamy liquid across the floor. Ben felt her shock and anger and embarrassment all roll off her in the Force. Then he saw a three-set of eyes staring at him and Jacen with recognition.

“Come *on*, Ben!” Jacen snapped, but the Gran and the Omwati were already running. To Ben’s further shock, they weren’t running for the door. They were sprinting through a crowded bar right for the big balcony that overlooked Windlash Alley.

A speeder, he thought dumbly. *They must have a speeder.*

Ben burst into a sprint. Pulling on the Force, he threw himself high over the pointy heads of a pair of Togruta dining at their table. Paks Veem had plucked a hold-out blaster and was shooting wildly behind him. Patrons were throwing themselves to the floor and holding arms over their heads, which made Ben’s and Jacen’s job only a little easier because it made it easier for the *other* guys too.

Ben charged ahead, too fast for Paks Veem to get a good shot at him. Jacen was shouting at him to wait now, but Ben didn’t stop. The mission had been blown because of him and he wasn’t going to let them get away entirely.

Their quarry got to the balcony first. An open-topped airspeeder pulled up in front of them; some being with a

round helmet was at the controls. The Omwati jumped into the back seat first. Paks Veem stood on the edge of the balcony, turned around, and aimed one last shot at his pursuers.

“Down!” Jacen shouted, to Ben or the Gran or everybody else. “Get *down!*”

Ben jumped.

Paks Veem shot, missed.

Ben slammed into the Gran shoulder-first. His blaster flew into the air and was gone. They both spilled across the hard smooth surface of the speeder. Ben grabbed hold of the Gran's arm with one hand and used the Force to spin his body around so he had Paks Veem pinned to the speeder's back with both knees.

Then the vehicle shot forward.

Ben lost balance and tumbled backward. He let out a short cry, lost even to his own ears as the wind rushed past his face. He was facing the starless night sky, and the speeder's rear lights were shrinking before him. He was falling, falling. He tried to pull on the Force to arrest himself but nothing responded.

For a long horrible second, Ben Skywalker was certain he was about to die.

Then he felt himself slow, like somebody was trying to pull him back up to the sky from which he'd fallen. The wind rushed by as he jerked to one side. He was still falling. His body slammed into something, hard. He felt horrible pain shoot up from right leg and was sure he heard something crack.

Then he blacked out.

A second later he was awake again. He was lying on some dirty pavement, staring up at the luminous walls of Windlash Alley. A small crowd of beings had gathered to gawk at the twelve-year-old boy who'd fallen from the sky, but none of them ventured close enough to touch him.

Then Jacen burst through the crowd. He skidded to a halt right in front of Ben. When he met the boy's eyes the panic in his face melted away.

“Sorry,” Ben groaned. “Let them go.”

Jacen bent on one knee over his cousin and pressed a hand against his cheek. “It doesn't matter, Ben. You're safe, that's what important.”

“Am I... okay?”

Jacen didn't answer at first. Not a good sign. Ben squeezed his eyes shut and asked, “I broke my leg, didn't I?”

“I'm sorry, Ben, I think you did.”

“Oh,” he groaned, “Dad is gonna *kill* me.”

“Don't be silly, Ben. He's going to kill both of us.”

